

chosen family

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by [Trickster88](#)

Summary

Harry meets Peter at four and a half (*four and three-quarters*, Harry insists, because adults always tell him he'll understand things when he's older, but he's old enough for it to be annoying). Harry's playing in the sandbox at Oscorp's daycare (kinetic sand, actually, because what's the point in being a cutting-edge, fortune 500 company if you don't have the newest stuff) and Gregory Haskins stomps on his sand castle. Harry's eyes fill with tears of frustration as Gregory laughs and steals the Tonka truck out of the sand, but before he gets the chance to wail, Peter is there.

Peter has a mop of soft, chestnut curls, and kind, brown eyes. He has dimples in his cheeks when he smiles, ever so gently, like Harry is a baby deer he's afraid of spooking, and Harry blinks at him, surprised.

Or, Harry and Peter, over the years. MCU with Harry Osborn.

[Art by HeyBoy](#)

Notes

WOW okay so this was months in the making! Bet you didn't expect the Marvel Rare Pair Bang, did you?!

Let's start with all my thanks, because a lot of hand went into this: first, thank you to my artist, [HeyBoy](#) for the beautiful art! I was so bummed when no one claimed my little fic (which...has since sprawled into a not-so-little, literally-the-largest-thing-I've-ever-written fic), but you came in at the last moment and created some amazing pieces! Please go follow them and [reblog their incredible art!!](#)

Second, thank you to [iron--spider](#), [ferretshark](#) and [seek-rest](#) for all the pep talks! You guys really helped me keep going, even when I was feeling my most discouraged. Without you, this might not have come to fruition the way it did! Thank you for lifting me (and Harry) up when we needed it <3

Special thank you to [Grace_d](#) for the Beta assist! Your notes were so, so, *so* fantastic, and you really helped a girl out even with all the craziness the world is in right now. Thank you so much!!

And the best for last, of course. Thank you to [heavyreign](#), to whom this fic is gifted. You are the entire reason I wrote this in the first place. It was so hard keeping it from you! I can't wait for you to read it. I sincerely (and anxiously) hope you enjoy it; just know that my Harry can't compare even a tenth to yours. I can only hope I've done him one iota of the justice he deserves.

[ART BY HEYBOY](#)
[REBLOG THE FIC](#)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

- Inspired by [Art by HeyBoy](#) by HeyBoyDraws



Harold Theopolis Osborn is not a quiet child.

He comes out of the womb screaming - it's colic, *bad* colic, for hours on end. He is six pounds, three ounces, bundled tightly in a blue blanket, four days from Christmas. Snow dusts the ground as Harry takes his first breath, and it's nothing short of beautiful.

He meets the world with big, brown eyes, and a head full of curly hair (it falls out, as baby hair is wont to do, but grows back into thicker, wilder curls, as he grows older). Norman Osborn meets his son with a smile, and kisses his wife as Harry clutches onto Norman's finger with one tiny hand.

"He's the best gift you've ever given me, Emily." Norman murmurs softly, awe in his voice, and he means it.

"He's the only one you're getting." Emily jokes through the haze of exhaustion, smiling down at her sleeping son, held close against her chest.

Harry grows. He grows up, he grows out, grows with baby fat and chubby, cherub cheeks. He says his first word - *apple* - at ten months, and his mother cheers and gives him a big, fat kiss.

(Harry is too young to spot the creep of disappointment in Norman's eyes, but kids are smart. They feel things, even if they don't always understand them.)

Harry is not a quiet child.

He skins his knee at two years old and screams for an hour, tears hot and heavy on his cheeks. His mother kisses them away and gives him ice cream and bandages to soothe the ache.

Harry meets Peter at four and a half (*four and three-quarters*, Harry insists, because adults always tell him he'll understand things when he's older, but he's old enough for it to be annoying). Harry's playing in the sandbox at Oscorp's daycare (kinetic sand, actually, because what's the point in being a cutting-edge, fortune 500 company if you don't have the newest stuff) and Gregory Haskins stomps on his sand castle. Harry's eyes fill with tears of frustration as Gregory laughs and steals the Tonka truck out of the sand, but before he gets the chance to wail, Peter is there.

Peter has a mop of soft, chestnut curls, and kind, brown eyes. He has dimples in his cheeks when he smiles, ever so gently, like Harry is a baby deer he's afraid of spooking, and Harry blinks at him, surprised.

Harry Osborn meets Peter Parker at four and three-quarters when the boy takes him by the hand and says excitedly, "Let's build an even bigger castle!" He doesn't wait for Harry to say yes, just pulls him back down into the box and starts piling sand into his bucket.

For once, Harry's tears dry before they fall. He takes a fistful of sand, and Peter smiles toothily at him as he piles it on top of Peter's.

(It is far from the last time Peter Parker will save Harry from tears.)

Harry and Peter become the best of friends, in the way that children do. They trade snacks at the daycare lunch table, and share a mat at nap time. Harry brings home drawings to his mother of him and Peter - the castles they build, the dragons they fight - and she laughs and hangs them on the fridge.

(Norman does not show the same enthusiasm, when he comes in the door late to dinner and Harry proudly points to the fridge from his booster seat. It is the first, maybe, but not the last time Harry goes ignored.)

For his fifth birthday party, Harry only invites Peter. His mother asks him, gently, if he might want to invite all of his daycare friends, but who is there except Peter? He certainly doesn't want Gregory anywhere near his birthday cake (*an Elmo cake, with red icing like his fur, please!* Harry asks, tugging on his mother's leg. She laughs and ruffles his hair - and he gets the cake, of course).

So Harry presents Peter with a hand-drawn invitation (the two of them, and a pile of messily drawn presents), his mother's neat scrawl on the back with the details for Peter's parents to read, about when and where the party is, exactly. Peter grins and wraps chubby arms around Harry's neck in an excited hug (and the daycare workers can't get him to let go, all the way through naptime).

Emily decks out the house with party streamers, and gives Harry a little party hat. He almost runs headlong into the door when the doorbell rings, sliding on the hardwood in his socks. Bernard, the family butler, helps him open it, lest he injure himself.

The door flies open, and Peter hands him a stick.

“For fighting dragons!” Peter laughs, eyes shining, and the two of them run off into the living room, chattering noisily, the way only five year old boys can.

“Sorry,” Mary Parker tucks blonde hair behind her ear, gaze flickering from Bernard to Emily, as the latter emerges from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dish towel. “He’s been bouncing off the walls all morning.”

“Mine too.” Emily chuckles, offering her hand for Mary to shake. “Peter’s the only one Harry invited, he’s been incredibly excited for him to get here.”

“Oh, goodness,” Mary laughs, shaking the proffered hand. “Well, I hope Peter makes it a good one!”

They play kingdoms, like usual, and run around the living room until they get tired. Harry proudly shows Peter his picture books, and all of his toys - his building blocks, his stuffed Elmo. They eat cake and buzz with sugar until they crash, dozing fitfully on the couch together.

(Norman does not attend his son’s birthday party, nor any of the ones that follow.)

That night, Emily puts Harry to bed with warm hands and soft kisses. He still refuses to give up the stick Peter bequeathed him with, which sits next to his pillow in the place of honor his Elmo usually has.

“Goodnight, baby,” Emily whispers, and Harry hums drowsily as she turns out the light.

He falls asleep to the start of an argument, echoing down the hallway from his parents’ room. It’s still the best birthday he’s ever had.

One day, on the second week of September, something happens.

It starts slowly, outside the glass window that leads from the daycare to the lobby of Oscorp - one person running, then two, then three, then everyone, all at once. They're going outside and back in, and one of the daycare workers goes to check and see what it is - then two of them, then the third while the first one stays, paler than usual. Harry feels like he might throw up, and he's not sure why, but he doesn't like that Ms. Amy looks like she might cry.

(Kids are smart. They feel, even if they don't know.)

Peter holds his hand, arts and crafts project abandoned on the table in front of him. He leans his head in and whispers, little eyebrows drawn with worry. "I'm scared, Harry."

Harry squeezes his hand back, nods and, because he has never lied to Peter, admits: "Me too."

The Oscorp building is evacuated ten minutes later. The alarms go off and the children scream, covering their ears. Harry doesn't, but only because he's too busy squeezing Peter's hand.

(This is not the last time he will be brave for Peter Parker.)

They get the field trip rope and everyone holds on as Ms. Amy leads them outside. There are - *wow, there are a lot of people outside*. Peter isn't holding onto the rope - he has his thumb in his mouth - but that's okay, because Harry is holding onto the rope for the both of them.

He looks around, and he looks up. Harry has lived with tall buildings all his life (and they seem so much taller, don't they, when you're small?)

He has never seen one smoking like that before.

Ms. Amy leads them away from it, down the block and into a diner, when the cook ushers them inside, but Harry spends the walk staring open-mouthed at the thick, black smoke pouring out of the two towers in Lower Manhattan.

"Is that a fire?" Peter whispers, huddled in the diner booth with Harry, still clutching his hand as

they stare out the window. “Where are the fire trucks? Why aren’t they putting it out?”

“I don’t know.” Harry whispers back, glancing around at the adults - who are all watching the TV, as the news anchor tries to explain what’s happening. “Maybe they can’t reach that high.”

They’re still sitting in the diner when the buildings come down; first one, then the other, twenty-nine minutes later. The shock rumbles through the earth and shakes the whole diner, shakes the booth, makes the kitchen pots and pans rattle. Peter cries and Harry holds his hand tight, watching as the dust engulfs the streets, barely stopping by the time it reaches their block.

Now it isn’t just Peter crying - it’s the adults, too, and Harry is old enough to understand the shock and horror on their faces.

Harry is picked up five hours later by his mother, who hugs him so hard he feels like he might burst, her tears drying in his curls. He begs her to bring Peter home with them, and Ms. Amy allows it, eyes puffy and red.

The boys are half asleep, curled up under a blanket on the couch, when Norman gets home. He’s still got ash on his suit, but Emily hugs him fiercely anyway, hands fisting in the back of his jacket. Norman kneels down by Harry, who blinks up at him slowly as Norman’s hand rests, achingly gentle, against his cheek.

“Daddy,” Harry mumbles thickly, and Norman smiles and closes his eyes, relieved.

“Hi, Harry.” Norman murmurs, his eyes opening as his thumb brushes over one chubby cheek. “Go back to sleep.”

“M’kay.” Harry sighs, snuggling closer to Peter, who’s drooling on the couch cushions. Norman stands as Emily comes up behind him, slipping her hand into his.

“Where are his parents? Where’s Richard?” Norman asks, nodding to Peter, as Harry’s eyes droop. Emily frowns, resting her head against her husband’s shoulder.

“I don’t know.”

The next day, Peter's uncle comes to pick him up.

Three days later, when the daycare starts up again, Peter doesn't show.

Nor any of the days after.

Harry grows. His hair grows longer, fluffy curls that tangle on top of his head. His father grumbles that they should cut it, but his mother won't hear of it; she laughs and calls it cute, kissing him on each cheek. The baby fat begins to disappear, giving way to the soft features of a child, the beginnings of an angled jaw and sharp cheekbones that will come with time.

He sees Peter again when they both go to first grade - the same chestnut hair, the same bright brown eyes - though he has an extra inch of growth on his height, same as Harry. They pick up where they left off except - Peter's quieter now, sadder. They lay in the grass in the schoolyard, staring up at the buildings and the clouds, and Peter takes his hand again, like they're five years old.

"I miss my mom," Peter whispers, like it's a secret, and maybe it is. Harry doesn't say anything, but maybe he doesn't have to. Maybe all Peter needs is for someone to listen.

It doesn't matter that Peter's quiet - Harry is loud enough for the both of them. When the older kids come to push Peter off the swingset, Harry pushes back, and throws them down into the mulch.

(Perhaps Harry has never stood up for himself the same way, but know this: he will always stand up for Peter Parker.)

Harry's in third grade - eight and a half, fifty-three pounds, four feet, three inches - when his mother gets sick.

He watches her deteriorate, watches as his beautiful, lively mother disappears before his very eyes.

He sits outside the bathroom and listens to her vomit into the toilet, clutching at his stuffed Elmo, until Bernard convinces him to come downstairs and have a cookie.

Norman comes home later and later every day (not that he ever really came home on time to begin with), looking more and more manic. Harry knows his father is looking for a cure, trying to do something, anything, to help his wife but - Harry knows, deep in his stomach, that there's nothing they can do.

(Children *feel*, and sometimes, they know.)

"You have to be strong, Harry," Norman tells him, as he tucks Harry in at night (since his mother is too bedridden to do it), one shaking hand brushing through wayward curls. "Can you do that for me?"

Harry nods that he can, but even as he does, he's not sure if it's true.

Emily is admitted to the hospital two months into fourth grade, and Harry starts spending more time at the Parker residence than his own home. Peter lives with his Aunt and Uncle now, who welcome him with bright smiles. The apartment is small, a little cozy, but it's warm. It reminds Harry of what his house felt like, when his mother was well enough to bake banana bread in the kitchen.

Aunt May has pretty, long brown hair that she lets Peter and Harry brush, sometimes, and she always says yes when they ask her to play the captured princess in their games. Uncle Ben comes home with dust on his boots, but no matter how tired he is, he always picks Peter up and spins him around until the boy is shrieking with laughter (and he picks Harry up too, when he's there, and makes him feel like he's flying).

One night, Bernard comes to retrieve him in the middle of dinner with the Parkers. He drives him straight to the hospital, and Harry stares out the window of the car, wishing he had Peter's hand to hold. He knows something's wrong, and he knows it's probably his mother.

(Children always know, eventually.)

Emily is asleep when he arrives, machines beeping softly, the gentle hiss of her nasal cannula filling up the silence. She looks peaceful, but gaunt, a body ravaged from incurable disease.

Somehow, his father looks worse.

Harry sits in the chair next to his mother's bed and holds her hand. Norman sits across from him, head in his hands, despair written all over the tense lines of his shoulders, the ragged quality of his breathing.

Harry wants to be strong, but it's hard. Norman didn't tell him how hard it would be, when he asked it of him, but it's the most difficult thing Harry's ever tried to do: to hold his mother's hand and try not to cry when he knows deep down she's not going to wake up.

He tries to be strong, but he's only nine, and the tears fall anyway, a dull ache in his chest.

(His mother is not there to soothe him with ice cream and warm kisses.)

The machines go off, a cacophony of noise and Harry cries, cries so hard it hurts. Nurses rush in and start yelling about a crash cart, as Harry is shunted off to the side. His father doesn't look up even with all the commotion, an immovable statue in his chair, head still buried in his hands.

(Years later, Harry wonders if Norman ever really left that hospital room, in any of the ways that mattered.)

Two hours later, Norman emerges. Harry stares at his father through the haze of tears that still hasn't stopped, but Norman just grabs him by the arm and frog-marches him out of the hospital.

They ride in complete silence, the kind of silence Harry knows better than to break. The city is still bright and alive, even in the absolute dead of night, but the lights blur together with his tears. Harry's surprised, however, when they end up back at the Parker's apartment. Norman bangs on the door, uncaring of the late hour, and as soon as the door opens he flees, leaving Harry sobbing at Uncle Ben's feet.

(Norman still has trouble looking at him, even now. Harry has his mother's eyes, her dimpled smile, her carefree laugh. Norman asked Harry to be strong for both of them, really, because he couldn't be.)

"Dad - Daddy - " Harry cries, trying to follow his dad back down the hallway, but Ben catches him around the waist and pulls him into a tight hug.

“It’s okay, Harry,” Ben murmurs, as May hurries into the entryway, summoned by the racket. Harry screams and buries his face in Ben’s shoulder, breath hitching painfully. Aunt May, who smells like citrus and sunshine, takes him from Ben, wraps him up in her arms and just rocks him on the cheap carpeting.

Peter appears in the doorway from his bedroom, rubbing his eyes sleepily, stuffed rabbit dragging along on the floor behind him. Ben says something to him - Harry can’t hear what it is, over his own blubbing - but Peter doesn’t seem disturbed. He walks up to Harry with clear, brown eyes, and wipes away his friend’s tears gently.

“I’m sorry,” Peter says simply, and Harry sniffs, quieting. Peter takes Harry’s hand, folds their skinny fingers together and squeezes, tight. “Your mom was really nice.”

“Yeah,” Harry mutters, and Peter tugs him, leading him back towards his bedroom. May and Ben trail after them, watching as Peter pushes Harry towards his little twin bed and makes him climb up. Peter pulls the blankets over Harry clumsily, tucking him in.

“You should go to sleep,” Peter says wisely, and Harry just nods, looking up at his friend.

“C-can you s-stay?”

“Of course he can,” May assures Harry, and Peter climbs up after him, wriggling under the blankets. May moves forward to help, smoothing her hand through Harry’s hair, then Peter’s. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, May,” Peter hums, as Harry burrows closer, tucking his curls under Peter’s chin. He drifts off, exhausted, worn out from crying, but safe with Peter’s warm weight next to him.

(Tomorrow, it will be worse. Peter and Harry will sit in Peter’s room, pretending to play while May screams into Norman’s answering machine, “You can’t abandon your son when he needs you the most! What kind of a father would do that to a *child*, I - ”

For now, though, Harry drifts, blessedly dreamless.)



The world turns on, even when it feels like it shouldn't (and it *shouldn't*, it shouldn't have the audacity to even try when there's this gaping hole in Harry's life where his mother used to be). But it does.

And children grow.

They grow with knobby knees and sticky fingers, gangly and uncertain. They grow with laughter and tears, two extreme ends on a scale they search to balance all their lives. They grow with passion and excitement, with gap-tooth smiles and hair that curls down into their eyes (the hair is mostly Peter; his curls are loose where Harry's tighten, over the years, and at twelve and a half, Harry's heart skips a beat when he notices how Peter's eyelashes brush his bangs, when they grow too long).

Harry Osborn is not a quiet child, but he's not a child anymore.

He takes up art - his mother loved it, loved painting in the sitting room and singing along to Sesame Street with Harry. He's not sure where her paintings are now - Norman had them taken down a long, long time ago (every trace of Emily, erased; except the one he couldn't rid himself of). Recently, he's started replacing the blank spaces with masks - ugly, twisted things that scream and grimace. Harry doesn't like them.

"You should put up *your* art!" Peter tells him, ankles crossed behind him as he lays on his stomach on Harry's bedroom rug. He's flipping through some science book, thick frame glasses slipping down his nose - they're new, and too big, but ever since he got them he's been tearing through books at a frightening speed. Harry just laughs and tags along to the library with Peter and Ben,

helping to carry the load back to the Parkers' apartment.

"Nah, none of it's any good," Harry shrugs, glancing at the half-finished painting on his easel. It's a snow-covered landscape of Central Park, but he used too much blue and he thinks it's starting to look like the moon. Probably better to scrap the whole thing, at this point. "Besides, my dad's not big on art anyway."

Peter frowns, a small furrow appearing in his brow, like he can't believe anyone wouldn't like Harry's artwork. Harry smiles, a soft thing reserved for Peter, who can't help but be sweet as he doggedly tells him just how good he thinks Harry's paintings are.

(A week from today, Harry will walk into Peter's kitchen and the fridge will be covered - fully covered - in his artwork. May is just as sweet as her nephew - he had to get it from somewhere.)

Harry's father, by contrast, is all sharp edges, poking at his fragile insides when Harry gets too close. So he grows a shell - a tough skin, Norman calls it, cuffing Harry proudly on the shoulder - but it's not skin. It is lacquer, hard and brittle, protecting him. Harry is not quiet, but hidden, tucked away neatly inside himself.

It's the only way he knows how to be. Norman is a hard person to love, and sometimes Harry wonders how his mother did it, when he's seething in his room, trying not to scream.

(You cannot choose your family.)

He is fourteen and he is quiet. To be the opposite is to be disappointing, and Harry is old enough now to understand that disappointment is unacceptable. His father is sharper than ever, polished and whetted, a razorblade that Harry isn't sure how to handle anymore, and when did it become this way?

But he has Peter - Harry can't remember a time where he didn't, anymore, and he's so grateful for it. They sit on the balcony of the Osborn penthouse, licking popsicles in the waning sun.

Ninth grade starts in a little less than a month, and Peter turns to him, eyes wide, almost comical behind those darn glasses of his. "What if everybody's mean, in high school? Everybody's mean in the movies."

Harry sighs and rests back on his palms, looking out over the city. He can't imagine anyone being mean to Peter Parker - but kids can be cruel, and Peter is sweet. Harry has known these two facts since the beginning. "Those are *movies*, Pete. I'm sure it won't be that bad. For you, anyway, once you ditch me for all your super cool, new friends - "

Peter shoves him good-naturedly, and ends up leaning their shoulders together. "Shut up, Harry, jeez. You're my best friend, you dork."

"Oh, *I'm* the dork?" Harry presses a hand to his chest in mock affront, and Peter snickers - but he's worrying the popsicle stick between his teeth, and his knee is bouncing. Always anxious, did he ever relax? Harry's insides might be soft, but Peter's are softer (and Harry has always protected them).

"Mmhm, certified, Grade A doofus." Harry lets them lapse into silence until Peter caves with a quiet huff. "...I'm scared, Harry."

"Me too." Harry says evenly, and Peter smiles at him slowly, shy and thankful. He reaches over to take Harry's hand, like he always has, like they're five all over again, and if he notices the way Harry's cheeks tinge pink, he doesn't say anything.

(Peter has always been the braver one, of the two of them.)

"*What?!*"

Harry stares at his father, gobsmacked. Norman is unphased, as Harry struggles to keep the panic from choking him. He sips whiskey from a crystal glass and eyes his son critically. "You're going to St. Norbert's, Harry, and that's the end of it."

"But - why? Why can't I just stay here? Midtown is a *great* school!"

Norman shoots him a look of crushing disappointment; it makes him feel like a whiny child. Maybe he is but - New York is his home! His father wants to send him *overseas*, to an English boarding school, so far away from everything he's ever known.

(Norman's gotten rid of every piece of Emily, barring the singular one that he can't; except, of course, he *can*.)

"I'm thinking about your future - you need to get into a good college, the best college. Oscorp is going to be yours one day, and you have to be ready for that responsibility." A pause for another sip. "This is not up for discussion, Harry."

Harry can tell his father's patience is wearing thin, but he presses anyway, because the tears are prickling at the back of his eyes and it feels like a prison sentence, with no end in sight. "But - "

"This is for your own good!" Norman snaps, his words as sharp as his edges, bitterly cold, like ice. It freezes Harry's arguments in his throat, pushing them down, down, down. Norman is a hard person to love, and a harder person to fight with. "It's time to grow up."

Norman does not ask *can you do this for me?*, his mouth a hard line, stubborn and commanding. His eyes say, *you will do this for me*, and Harry is fourteen. He is not a child.

And he is quiet.

Peter cries harder than Harry does, at the airport. His face is puffy, red, magnified by those ridiculous glasses. Harry sniffs and wipes his nose on his sleeve, nodding along to all of Peter's ramblings - that he'll call him every day, and send him letters and care packages and they'll hang out like *all the time*, whenever Harry comes home for break.

He doesn't bother Peter with his speculations of how he might not be coming home for breaks. It would only make him sad, frustrated, and Harry has always tried his best to protect Peter from that.

"I'm gonna miss you, Har," Peter murmurs to him, arms tight around his neck, and Harry buries his face in the jut of Peter's bony shoulder, eyes aching with tears. He nods, unable to speak, and Bernard touches his shoulder gently - they have to go, they have to get in line for security if they're going to make it.

(Norman does not show up to enforce his iron will. Or say goodbye to his son.)

Harry cries on the plane, all seven hours. He cries on the train, from the airport to Spalding, and he cries in the van that appears to take him to the school. He cries in his dormitory, curled around a pillow, and he cries the following morning at the breakfast table, uncaring of the looks he gets from the other boys.

At the tail end of breakfast, when Harry's sniffles have finally trailed off (there's another wave incoming, he's sure of it; his life feels like an endless ocean, the type of despair only being fourteen can bring), a severe-looking teacher stops by the table with a package.

"Harold Osborn?" She looks down at him, over horn-rimmed glasses, and Harry nods silently. She deposits the mail next to his barely-touched breakfast without further comment, and he blinks at the brown paper packaging in confusion.

Harry opens it, biting on his lower lip until he can't, anymore, because his mouth has dropped open. It's a beautiful Prismacolor set, and a thick sketchpad, tied together with red string. There's a note, written on paper ripped out of a composite notebook, and Harry knows who it's from before he reads a single word.

Harry!!!

How's your new school? Is everyone nice? What's jetlag like? What's ENGLAND like? You have to tell me everything.

Ben helped me pick these out for you at the art store!! I saved up my allowance for them, I hope I got the right stuff! When you come back, I want you to show me everything you drew, okay?

Miss you already,

Peter Parker

Harry smiles, eyes wet; but this time, he doesn't cry.

(Peter Parker has always saved him from tears.)

St. Norbert's isn't as bad as he thought it would be.

The uniform is starch and itchy, making Harry pull at his collar constantly, but it's bearable. The food is so-so (Harry misses Bernard's cooking, misses making waffles with Peter and Ben on Sunday mornings, waiting for May to wake up after her late night shift at the hospital), and the kids aren't mean...exactly. They don't bully him outright, but he sits alone, always, ignoring haughty whispers that float over his head. He does not belong there, and everybody knows it.

(Sometimes, Harry wonders if he belongs anywhere at all.)

He draws to fill his time, filling page after page of his sketchbook, sending Peter increasingly better renditions of the brave knights - Sir Parker and Sir Osborn - saving Lady May from the fire-breathing dragon.

(If the dragon comes out looking like his father, on occasion; well, Harry just doesn't send those.)

Peter writes him letters, just like he said he would (Peter's never been known to break a promise). He joins Band, and Robotics Club, and the Academic Decathlon, and he makes a friend named Ned and a not-really-friend-but-still named Michelle. Peter writes about them for a page and a half, and Harry tries his best to curb the wicked jealousy that rears its ugly head. It's not Ned's fault - if anything, actually, Ned seems really nice, and Peter's letters start to say, *'P.S. Ned says hi!'*

His suspicions as to Norman's motives are proven correct when Harry is not called home for Christmas. The letter Peter sends packaged with a brand new set of oil paints (Harry's Christmas present, Peter wished he could have given it to him in person) is warped with disappointment. Harry tells him not to worry, that he's had several invitations from his friends here to spend Christmas with their families, he'll be fine.

It's the first time he's ever lied to Peter, and it tastes like copper in his mouth, acrid and bright.

Harry gets to come home for just two weeks over his summer vacation. It's both the best and worst thing he could have hoped for. By day, he spends every second he can with Peter; at the movies, Coney Island, anywhere. By night, he screams himself hoarse arguing with his father. He'd all but forgotten, with 3,431 miles separating them, how sharp Norman was. He had let his shell grow weak with disuse, and now he was exposed.

(Or, perhaps, Norman had only brought him here to make him bleed.)

"- complete waste of time!" Tonight, the yelling was over his sketchbook; Harry had been careless enough to leave it on his bedside table, and his father had seen it. Norman sneers in disgust at the page he's brandishing, and Harry's face burns with a horrible cocktail of embarrassment and rage. "What, are you going to pursue art for the rest of your life?"

(There is no one who can make you feel as small as Norman Osborn.)

"So what if I am?" Harry shouts, hands clenched tightly into fists. Norman eyes him with disdain, a scathing look that says *you are not my son, how could you be? You are a failure and a disappointment, and I will not tolerate it.*

(They say you cannot choose your family, and they must be right, because Harry doesn't know who in their right mind would ever choose this.)

Harry doesn't need to hear any of it aloud. This is his father, though. This is Norman Osborn. He says it anyway, and burns Harry's sketchbook in the fireplace for good measure. Summer be damned.

Harry is fifteen when he realizes he doesn't like girls.

Maybe it's not fair to say he doesn't like girls; St. Norbert's doesn't exactly let them get out much, how would he know? But they do have boys, and when Jack Atkinson smiles at Harry when he picks Jack's gym towel up off the floor for him, all dimples and bright blue eyes, Harry's heart does something complicated while it tries to escape his ribcage. It is not a slow realization; it's a lightning bolt, his life sliding into place. *Oh.*

He doesn't tell anyone. There's no one at the school who would understand, and he didn't need to add any ammo to the boys who still whispered rudely at his back. He doesn't tell his father, for obvious reasons. Every time Harry thought he'd reached the lowest stage of disappointment, there was always another level waiting for him.

He's not sure why he doesn't tell Peter, though.

They've upgraded to one phone call a month, which Harry picks up collect, from Peter. He would absolutely take calls from him more often - he feels it's the least his father owes him at this point - but Peter is infuriatingly selfless. He worries over the cost far more than Harry does, not wanting to be a burden.

(Peter has never been a burden, but no matter how many times Harry tells him this, he's not sure Peter believes him.)

Peter's talking animatedly about the science fair project he's working on with Ned, voice slightly tinny on the other end of the line. Harry closes his eyes, imagining Peter sprawled out on his bed with the phone against his ear. He can almost pretend he's there with him, if he tries hard enough.

"Did you fall asleep on me over there, Osborn?" Peter teases, and Harry snorts, shaking his head, though Peter can't see him. "Have I finally bored you to death talking about science?"

"You're never boring." Peter laughs at that, the clearest sound to come through their connection, and Harry can't help but smile. Peter was like that - you couldn't be anything but happy around him.

"You haven't sent me any drawings recently." It's not a question, not an accusation, but there's something in Peter's voice that gets Harry to open his eyes. Peter lets the sentence hang in the air for a second before continuing. "Did you run out of ways for our brave heroes to rescue Lady May?"

Harry's gaze darts to the replacement sketchpad he'd bought on their weekly shopping trip two months ago, tucked on his bookshelf. He thinks of the doodles there, and the fact that he put the pad over on the shelf for good when he realized he was sketching Peter's eyes, over and over again, never quite getting the right shade of brown.

(He doesn't know why he doesn't tell Peter, except that he does know. He thinks of the sketchpad,

of the sheaf of letters he saves in a box under his bed, of the way Peter holds his hand, the way Peter has *always* held his hand. Harry would never risk that for anything, not a single thing.)

“Sorry Pete,” Harry spreads his fingers on his bedspread, stark white against the dark blue cover. Norman’s sneer pokes sharply at him, even through memories. “I don’t draw much anymore.”

It’s not even a lie. Not really. If he’s lying to himself, that’s his business, isn’t it?

“Hey Har, it’s me. Uh, Peter Parker. I hope you’re doing okay! I know I sound like death, ugh, please ignore it I have like, the flu, or something. Even though I got my flu shot...sorry, thought I was gonna sneeze, didn’t happen. BLERGH. I feel like d e a t h. Anyway, call me when you get a chance! I have to tell you - the craziest thing happened dude ! - alright, I’ll stop rambling, but CALL ME! Bye!”

Harry looks at the clock. Peter left the message for him while he was asleep, but it’s 8AM now, which means it’s 3AM Peter’s time. Harry thinks to text him, but he doesn’t. Peter’s sick, he needs to sleep. He’ll call him later, after classes.

And he does call. Peter just doesn’t answer.

Harry calls two more times, an hour apart. He tells himself that Peter’s phone is off, that it ran out of battery, that he’s busy with some project or Decathlon or or *or* -

None of it helps. He knows, he *knows* something is wrong. He knows it in his bones, in the awful, nagging feeling deep in his gut. Even if Peter were mad at him, he’d never freeze him out like this.

Peter doesn’t call him back for three days.

By the third day, Harry calls Bernard and practically begs him to check on the Parkers. No, not even practically - he *does* beg, and eventually Bernard acquiesces, with the careful admonition to *calm down, Harry*. But he can’t. Something is *wrong*.

When his phone finally does light up with Peter's goofy contact picture, Harry has just enough time to be relieved before Peter says the words that make him wish he'd never answered.

"Ben's dead." Peter sniffs, and the hoarseness in his voice isn't from illness. Harry's stomach drops, down down down. "He's dead, Harry, he - he -"

"I'm sorry." Harry says quickly, because he doesn't want to make Peter say it.

(Later, he's told: two bullets to the abdomen, Ben bled out under Peter's shaking hands. Peter wanted to call him, but he'd screamed himself into silence, hence the three day delay. Harry had to agree, this wasn't the kind of news to get over text.)

"I'm so sorry, Pete."

They don't say anything else. What is there to say? It's unfair, it's *cruel*. The world is a terrible, terrible place and Harry has never been religious, but he thinks God must have gotten a wire crossed somewhere if taking a man like Ben away from someone like Peter makes any kind of sense.

Peter snuffles on the other end of the line, while they sit there in silence together. The snuffles turn into quiet sobs, and Harry clutches the phone to his ear, ignoring the way his hands shake. He thinks of Ben; sunny, steady Ben - the man who always brought his wife flowers and taught Harry how to fly - and he has to blink away his own tears.

"It's m-my fault," Peter whispers, so softly Harry almost doesn't hear him. He's quick to correct him, to tell him that *it wasn't your fault, Pete* and *how could you have known?*

Harry, generally, does not lie to Peter. For the first time, though, Harry's left wondering whether or not Peter really believed him.

Things are different, after Ben. Harry isn't surprised, and he tries not to take it personally. It's difficult, though, when the periods of not hearing from Peter start to grow longer, their phone calls more infrequent. Some of it is grief, and some of it is this new Stark Internship that's taking up so much of his time. Peter calls Harry during the lunch hour from the Gendarmenmarkt in Berlin,

explaining everything about some internship conference he's been whisked away to, before quickly and excitedly giving Harry the full play-by-play of the street performers.

He doesn't get many details about it (not that he expected to; if his father was stringent about what Oscorp details he was/was not allowed to share, Harry could only assume Stark Industries was even worse), but Peter seems excited ("It's *Tony Stark*, Harry, he was in my living room!"), and Harry is so, so happy for him.

(If anyone deserves something good, for once, it's Peter.)

Especially when every other day, New York seems to be falling apart. The Staten Island Ferry splits in half just as Harry is getting out of history class, and not even a month later, a *plane* takes out most of Coney Island while he's sleeping. Peter brushes it off when they talk about it, so it can't be affecting him too much - though Harry thinks Peter's totally nuts when he doesn't even want to talk about the fact that the Vulture guy turned out to be the parent of a Senior at Midtown.

But sometimes they go weeks now, in between updates. Harry vents to Bernard, and maybe he sounds more desperate than he thinks he does, because he can practically hear the hesitation in the butler's silence. "What? What is it?"

"Sometimes," Bernard says slowly, gently, and the tone alone is enough to make Harry's heart *squeeze* uncomfortably in his chest. "People grow apart, Harry."

It's the worst thing he could have said, because it makes *sense*. What did he expect, that they'd be best friends forever, slaying dragons and being dumb kids? People grow up, and the two of them are no different. At some point, their lives had to diverge...he just didn't expect it to happen this soon.

If Harry can't really imagine his life without Peter, well. That's on him, isn't it?

Harry manages to wrestle his summer back from Norman's clutches and finds himself at LaGuardia Airport at the tail end of July. St. Norbert's gets out a full month later than an American school would (even though they start at the *same time*), and it's just another reason to be bitter about his situation.

He drags his bags from baggage claim out to the carpool, jetlagged and grumpy - he hates airports, hates any public place with this many damn people - and blinks at the harsh sunlight. It's not the only thing he's blinking at, though, because there's a giant, bright orange sign with his name scrawled on it. His name and about, if he had to guess, nine bottles of glitter. It looks like a unicorn had the runs, if he's being honest. The only thing brighter than the sign, of course, is Peter's smile.

"Peter?"

Peter laughs delightedly and pulls him into a hug, ignoring the bags squished between them. Harry hugs him back, surprised, fingers curling in the soft fabric of his hoodie. "What are you - what are you *doing* here?"

"*Somebody* didn't think to tell me they'd be in town! What, you thought I wouldn't find out?" Peter turns the hug into a scuffle, looping Harry into a headlock. "Is that what you thought, Osborn?"

"Ah, Peter, Peter I fold, I give!" Peter's grip is tighter than Harry was expecting, and he laughs breathlessly as Peter finally relents. He rubs at his neck, and to his surprise, Peter looks a little sheepish. "I'm sorry I didn't say anything. It's the middle of summer, I didn't know if you had plans..."

Peter rolls his eyes and pushes a wayward curl out of his face. "You're a total doofus, Harry. What plans could I have that I wouldn't want you to be a part of?"

For that, Harry has no answer. Peter tucks the sign under one arm and grabs one of Harry's bags to help. "Now hurry up, Harry! I want you to meet Ned!"

Ned Leeds is not what Harry was expecting.

Actually, he'll retract that. He's not sure what he was expecting, but Ned is better than anything he could have imagined. He greets Harry with a warm hug and excitement in his eyes. "Peter's told me so much about you, dude! It's great to finally meet you. Hey, do you want to help us build a giant Lego TIE fighter?"

Ned is a sunny person with an infectious laugh, and Harry likes him immediately. He doesn't know what he was expecting, but is it really so surprising that Peter attracts kind hearts?

Michelle, on the other hand, is entirely the opposite.

Harry calls her Michelle because when they met he tried to call her MJ, missing Peter and Ned's frantic waving behind her. Her eyes narrowed and her smile sharpened, and MJ told him in no uncertain terms that he was to call her *Michelle*, and also, while she was at it, how did he feel about Oscorp's most recent environmental lawsuit?

"She's...friendly." Harry remarks, when MJ finally stops giving him the third degree, proclaims them losers, and leaves.

Peter and Ned exchange a knowing look.

"Not particularly. But she'll warm up to you. She warmed up to us but it took like, forever." Ned commiserates, and Peter nods encouragingly. Harry can't help his dubious look, and Peter laughs, clapping him on the back. Ned just shrugs, spreading his hands helplessly. "At least she doesn't hate you?"

That, Harry has to admit, is something.

They fall into a routine, for the few months that he's back. Harry spends as much time as he can out of the penthouse, away from his father's harsh admonitions - be it out with Peter, or alone in the city. Peter's internship takes up a decent chunk of his time, and there's less one-on-one time with him too, now that Ned's in the picture. Harry feels silly for the ugly, green jealousy that rears its head, there's no reason for it. Peter calls him up excitedly to make plans for the three of them, and then *Ned* starts calling him, texting him memes and the dumbest pictures of Peter he has on his phone.

Harry can't quite help it though, the fierce loneliness that flares up now and again. Ned has never been anything but inclusive - when they all go places, when Peter and Ned laugh at a joke Harry doesn't fully understand - but on his worst days, he can't help the way he feels.

He doesn't think anyone notices. He hides it well (he knows how to *hide*), buries it deep. MJ might see it, but he never can quite get a read on her, so he can't say for sure. If she sees through him, she doesn't say anything.

Harry's jealous of MJ more often than Ned, when Peter's expression goes all soft around her (they all know what it means, but she won't cut Peter a break, so nothing happens). When Peter finally does admit it one night (a whisper in the dark, "I think I *like like* her, Harry," Harry on the top bunk, Peter on the bottom) his heart aches for reasons Harry's not going to look at too closely (he *can't* look at them, he can't).

If this is the only piece of Peter he gets - to be his friend, his best friend - well, he's lucky to have him at all.

"So," Harry starts, after a brief lull in Peter's tales of exploits with Ned ("Are you laughing at me, Harry?" Peter asked, after describing the battle royale he and Ned had braved for a midnight copy of *Harry Potter & The Half-Blood Prince*. "Nope." Harry told him, trying not to let the cheshire grin color his voice.) It's only been a month or so since he went back to St. Norbert's, and he misses them both already. Harry holds the phone close to his ear, forefinger tapping an idle rhythm on the back of it. "Tony Stark, huh?"

"What?" Peter says too quickly, voice immediately sharp and nervous. "Tony, uh, Tony Stark?"

"Yes, Peter. Tony Stark." Harry rolls his eyes and flops over on his back, looking up at the ceiling of his dormitory. Peter is many things, but subtle is not one of them. "You know we have the internet in England too, right?"

"Shit," Peter sighs, sounding vaguely embarrassed, and Harry smirks to himself. "You, uh, you saw, then?"

"Of course I did." Of course he did, especially when Ned was the one sending him the TMZ article with so many exclamation points he had to scroll. But Harry just...conveniently neglects to mention that part. "'Tony Stark's Secret Son?' I'm just saying, Pete, if you wanted a sugar daddy, you could do so much better."

"A - *what?*" Peter squawks, and Harry has to muffle a laugh in his pillow, holding the phone away so Peter can't hear him - even as it buzzes with Peter's high-pitched protests. "I am *not* - that is not even remotely - that's so *gross*, Harry, oh my God - "

“I’m *joking*, I’m joking, calm down before you strain something.” Harry snorts, running a hand back through his curls. “When you said you worked ‘for Tony Stark’ I didn’t think you meant *for* Tony Stark. He takes high schoolers?”

“I dunno, I guess he just made an exception.” It sounds like a lame excuse, and Peter must feel Harry’s judging eyebrow raise even from across the ocean. “But it’s not that glamorous. He’s just, like, my boss. I help out with stuff, uh, where I can, but I don’t even see him that much, really.”

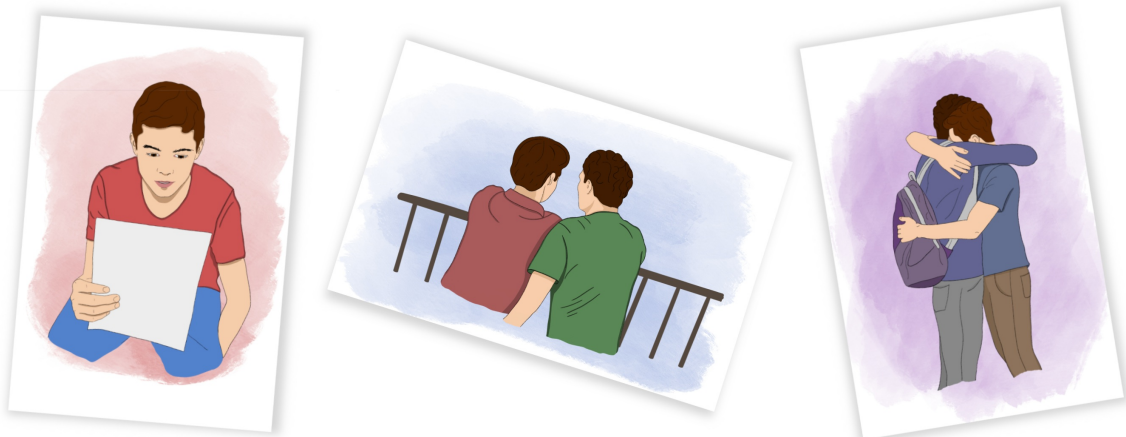
“Right.” Harry says doubtfully, though he manfully refrains from pointing out that bosses don’t normally take their employees to the zoo, or buy them stuffed elephants. That’s why they labeled it ‘Tony Stark’s Secret Son’ - Tony’s smiling, laughing at something Peter’s saying, and it doesn’t look like a mentor with his mentee at all - it looks like a man with his son, and Harry doesn’t quite know what to make of it. “But, like, what do you do?”

Peter rambles for a second, but it’s clearly some canned, corporate speech about emerging technologies, carefully skirting around anything important. The gist of it, though, is product development, and the rest is hidden neatly behind an NDA.

“I thought you were more interested in biochemical sciences, like what Oscorp does?” Harry pulls at a thread on his bedspread idly. Peter huffs over the line, and Harry can practically see the way he’d gesture exasperatedly.

“Yeah, I am, but it’s *Tony Stark*.”

Even Harry has to admit, Peter has a point.



One day, on the third week of October, something happens.

It starts slowly, at first. Richard goes to the bathroom and takes far too long, so when George asks ten minutes later, Mrs. Lewis tells him to go, regardless of the status of the hall pass. The pass in question, however, is on the floor just outside the door, and George picks it up, offering it quizzically to Mrs. Lewis.

Richard is nowhere in sight. Then, suddenly, neither is Jack, or Tommy, or Edward - they disappear, disintegrating right in front of him. Harry's frozen at his desk, watching the ash swirl in the air. There's no screaming, or shouts of surprise, like you might expect. They all just stare.

Out of 24 students, 12 remain. Mrs. Lewis goes last, falling to a pile on her desk, and distantly, Harry realizes he's shaking. He's shaking, but his hands stay solid, stark white on the dark wood desk. He thinks, desperately, that he must be dreaming, having some kind of nightmare, but he doesn't wake up.

He doesn't wake up, and Peter never answers his calls, in the months that follow.

Harry comes back stateside, a month later. He thinks it would have been longer, if his father hadn't paid an exorbitant amount of money to get him home. He's glad for it - for the hug Norman gives him, clutching him tight. He's glad to be home, within familiar walls when the world seems so different, now.

Bernard isn't there, though.

Two weeks after he lands in New York, Harry goes to visit May. He doesn't call first, because Peter still hasn't answered him (and he *knows* why, even if it hasn't been said), but he just doesn't think he could handle it if he got her voicemail, too.

(*"Hi, you've reached Peter! Peter Parker! Uh, yeah - leave a message!"*)

Harry stands outside the apartment door for the longest minute of his life before he manages to scrounge up enough courage to knock. It takes a moment, but finally the door swings open, and a haggard looking May Parker answers.

“Harry.” Her eyes widen behind those familiar bug-eye lenses of her’s, and Harry doesn’t even say anything as he moves forward to hug her, like he’s ten years old all over again. May hugs him back, holding on like she has to make sure he’s real, and they sink to their knees, right there on the carpet of the doorway.

“Hi, May.” Harry says shakily, as she buries her face in his shoulder and sobs. He rests a hand gently on the back of her head, stroking soothingly through her long, brown hair. He remembers learning how to braid it, because Peter always insisted that princesses had braids. She still smells like citrus (she’s been using that same shampoo for *years*), and Harry closes his eyes against a wave of his own tears. “I’m so sorry.”

Neither of them say what they both already know, but the knowledge sits there, an empty space between them.

TONY STARK LIVES

The headline is triumphant, the one shining beacon of good news the world has to offer, in the wake of this nightmare. It’s on every station, broadcast live around the world. Tony looks ill but recovering, jaw clenched tight as he stands beside Colonel Rhodes, who delivers the prepared remarks in a calm, firm tone. Harry stirs his coffee and watches, unable to see Tony’s eyes behind the lenses of his sunglasses.

Harry wonders if he knows Peter’s gone. Iron Man probably has more important things to worry about than where his intern went, but Harry wonders all the same - whether or not Peter is just living in his and May’s memory now, or if there’s someone else out there who’s missing him, if only just for a second. *Tony Stark’s Secret Son*.

He thinks about asking May, then just as quickly thinks better of it. It’s the last thing she needs, right now, and Harry pushes his questions to the side. Tony Stark or not, what does it matter, anyhow? They’re *gone*.

Colonel Rhodes finishes the official statement and the questions light up like wildfire, reporters shouting over each other. He opens his mouth to say something, but Tony reaches out and squeezes his elbow with the arm that's not in a sling, and everyone goes silent.

"We're getting them back." Tony says, enunciating slowly, calmly. He says it like it's a fact, not a promise, and Harry's grip tightens on his coffee cup. "All of them. I don't care how long it takes. They're coming home."

He can't pinpoint why, exactly, but there's something in Tony's voice that he trusts.

Harry finishes high school from the penthouse. He doesn't argue with his father's wishes this time, but he's not doing it for him.

The night he finally completes his GED certificate, Harry raids his father's alcohol cabinet. The Jack and Coke is horrible, so he tries gin and Sprite next. That's equally terrible, so he settles on sipping expensive rum straight from the bottle. He watches *A New Hope* in Peter's honor, and then *Empire Strikes Back* in Ned's, because of course, he was gone too. Harry finishes a quarter of the bottle before his head gets fuzzy, and he passes out just as Luke's hand falls into the abyss.

He wakes up the next morning with a wicked hangover (he didn't think it was possible to feel any worse than he already did, and yet), and spends the morning lying there on the couch. His father didn't even catch him - always busy, busy, busy.

(Some things never change, even when half the planet disappears in an instant.)

He finds himself scrolling through Instagram mindlessly, feeling like death warmed over. There are cat videos, magic tricks, but nothing holds his attention for too long.

Somehow, he winds up on Ned's page.

The last picture Ned posted was of Midtown's Academic Decathlon team, posing in front of the bus that would take them to Regionals. They're all stunting their blue and yellow jackets - Flash has his arms crossed in the corner, Abe is crouched in the front throwing peace signs. Betty is grinning, her arm linked together with Cindy's. MJ lurks behind them looking too cool for school,

her patented smirk in place. Mr. Harrington just looks uncomfortable - and then, of course, there's Ned and Peter, beaming from ear to ear.

This leads him to Peter's page, and he scrolls through old photos, most of which already have his red like on them. Peter and May getting ice cream at the corner shop, Peter and Ned's latest robotics rig, a blurry photo of a pigeon with the caption *give me bread or I'll give you death*. The last one makes Harry laugh wetly, and he wipes impatiently at his tears as he scrolls to the next photo, this time one of Peter in a pair of dumb-looking safety goggles holding up a test tube.

Finally, he stops on a picture of Peter and none other than Tony Stark. It's hands down the top photo on Peter's profile, in terms of likes, anyway. They're holding some certificate (it's upside down, he's not even surprised), and giving each other bunny ears. Peter looks excited, smile wide, eyes shining. Harry still remembers the day he posted it, when he texted it to Harry privately followed by a deluge of exclamation marks, and Harry had laughed with Peter and Ned on a three-way call, the two of them talking over each other trying to tell him exactly what Flash's face had looked like when he'd seen the photo.

Harry smiles and closes his eyes against the tears. When he finally collects himself, he pours the rest of the rum in the sink, and doesn't touch another drop.

He thinks about it sometimes; what it would feel like to be gone, with the rest of them. Life gets easier, as the months pass, but sometimes the thought still occurs - an extra few steps off the balcony and he could be gone, too.

He doesn't do it, though. The furthest he ever makes it is the doorway, New York wind whipping at his curls. He can't do it - he can't do it to May, who has dinner with him every Sunday; to the kids he plays basketball with at the displaced shelter he volunteers at in Queens. Even Norman - for all their differences, all their fights, they're family and he can't do it to him, either. Peter wouldn't want that. Harry takes a deep breath, scrubs the tears from his cheeks, and closes the balcony door.

(Sometimes, he thinks it should have been him instead, reduced to ash. What is he, anyway? He is lost, he has always been lost, why does he get to live when people like Ben and Peter don't? He knows Peter wouldn't want him thinking that, either, but he thinks it all the same.

Sometimes, the hardest thing to do is *survive*.)

Six months after that terrible day in October, for the very first time, something good happens.

Harry's at the shelter helping with dinner, peeling potatoes with Leon and Hannah, two other volunteers. He's chuckling at something Hannah said - God, he doesn't even remember now, some little joke - when Cynthia, the head coordinator, shrieks bloody murder from the front room. They all jump, scattering potatoes and peels everywhere, and Harry bolts into the next room with his peeler raised (he's no idea how much help a vegetable peeler will be in a fight, but the adrenaline is rushing in his ears and it seems like the best idea at the time). He blinks at the scene in front of him but there's - there are *people* there, now, the shelter crowd has doubled, and Cynthia looks like she's going to faint.

"They're back," She says, stumbling into Leon, who catches her when she sways worryingly.
"They're all just - they're *back*."

His heart swells almost painfully in his chest, and Harry feels like he might burst, but he tamps down the feeling swiftly, refusing to hope.

(He can't hope, he can't, because what if she's wrong what if it's not real what if - *what if they're alive, what if they're all alive?*)

Harry calls Ned first with shaking hands, having to try three times before he gets through since the lines are, understandably, very busy. When he finally gets a, "Hello? Harry?" the relief that pulses through him is unparalleled, and he sags against the wall, letting out a slow breath. "Ned, oh my God, Ned hi. You're alive, it's true, holy *shit*."

"What happened? Did I die? I died, didn't I? I *said we were gonna die*, I called it - "

"Listen, Ned, where are you?" Harry is already heading for the door, heading for - he doesn't know where, but he needs to see Ned with his own two eyes, needs to see that he really is alive - the streets are in chaos, as he walks outside, and he almost balks.

"I'm at the MOMA, by the giant like, block statue thing." Harry's heart beats a little faster in his chest, and he turns about-face to head West. The MOMA - Ned's close, barely a fifteen minute walk. He starts to run, phone still clutched tightly to his ear - and despite his best efforts, he starts

to hope, too.

“Don’t move. I’ll be - I’m not far, I’ll be right there.” And then, because he can’t help himself, “Is - Is Peter with you?”

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Ned says quietly, after a beat. “He’s not. But if - if we’re all back, he’ll be okay.”

There’s something in Ned’s voice, however, that doesn’t sound completely sure.

Harry doesn’t see Peter for four days.

He finds Ned in the mess at the MOMA and hugs him fiercely, beyond ecstatic to see him. He’s real - flesh and blood and that brilliant smile - and he’s here, and after all this time he’s Harry’s friend, too. Harry reunites Ned with his family, watches as they cry and clutch each other, so grateful to be together again.

He calls May. She doesn’t answer. He didn’t think that she would - it’s almost impossible to get a phone call through, now, so it could be that - and she’s surely busy at the hospital, if not tracking down Peter. He tries to squash the irrational fear that she won’t find him; everyone else is back, why wouldn’t he be? But then - where is he?

When May does call him back, when she tells him they’re home and Peter would like to see him, whenever possible, he’s not expecting the state Peter is in. Peter’s battered and bruised, dark circles under his eyes that look like he’s been punched in the face, and he moves gingerly, like it hurts to breathe. Harry hugs him carefully, even though Peter doesn’t seem as concerned, hugging him back firmly.

“What *happened*?” He looks like he was run over by a truck. Was that what happened? Did he materialize in front of a 16-wheeler? Peter cracks a smile that looks like it should hurt his healing lip, and Harry quickly guides him to sit back down on the Parker’s squashy old couch.

“You know the uh - you know how the Avengers Compound was like, destroyed?” Harry nods dumbly. How is that relevant? Was he *there*? Peter shrugs and hides a wince. “I...was in the labs,

you know, at my internship, when it...when it happened. So that's where I showed up, uh, when I came back and - yeah, the building kind of, you know, exploded."

"Peter." Harry says, gobsmacked, and Peter reaches over to take his hand, rough and scarred and healing but warm, firm, alive. Harry interlocks their fingers, taking his free hand to rest it over top of Peter's.

(This is part of Peter that has never felt fragile and does not feel fragile now - his hands. They wave in the air while he talks; they build, they wrestle, they comfort. They hold his, and Harry feels like he can breathe again.)

Things don't return to normal - what the hell does normal mean at this point, anyway? But they do return to order. The world is a mess for a while, but humans have always been exceptionally resilient. Three months after the return of the dusted, school starts up again. Peter and Ned start their senior year, and Norman entreats him to apply to college.

"I'm not ready yet," Harry argues, and Norman sneers at him first in surprise at his audacity, then in disgust, and finally, anger.

"You're an adult now, Harry, and you have responsibilities! To me, to Oscorp, to your future!" Norman slams his drink down and points at Harry viciously. "How many times must you learn this, boy? Write your damned essays and stop dragging your feet. I won't have it. Did I raise a pansy for a son? Did I?"

Harry does not say everything he is bursting with inside. He does not say, *but you didn't raise me, not really* and he does not say *what if I don't want your legacy?* Norman sighs, the long-suffering sigh that makes Harry shrink - how does he always manage to make Harry feel less than? His father treats him like a spoiled child throwing a tantrum so often he wonders if that's what he really is.

(There is *no one* who can make you feel as small as Norman Osborn.)

"You are my son, Harry, you are an Osborn. We're going to change the world, do you know that? Everything I'm building, I'm building it for *you*." Norman's hand is heavy when he rests it on Harry's shoulder; it's meant to feel reassuring. It doesn't. His sneer transforms into a tight line, his

blue eyes sharp and clear. Norman's hand tightens, controlling, trapping. "You will not squander it. I will not allow it."

"Dad-"

"No! Don't you see, Harry? Don't you see what we're meant to achieve?" There's a spark of something in Norman's voice that Harry doesn't hear often; it's excitement, or maybe mania. The line is very thin, sometimes, with his father. "You're young, I know it's difficult. But you will understand, when you're older. One day - you'll take my place at the head of Oscorp, and then you'll understand, my boy."

Harry isn't sure he'll ever be old enough for his father. But he sends in the applications anyway. Norman Osborn is not a man easily refused.

(Suddenly, painfully, hopelessly; he misses his mother.)

Harry is accepted to Empire State University's Business major, with a minor in Biochemical Engineering. Peter and May bake him the world's most lopsided cake, and his father takes him, Peter, and Ned to a Mets game in celebration - so it's not the worst thing in the world, all said. It's a boatload of work, compounded by Norman wanting him to start shadowing more heavily at Oscorp, but he manages.

He also gets to see Peter and Ned a lot, now that he's in New York, and that's better. Well...he *would* see them a lot, except Peter is...he hates to use the word flaky, but it seems the most apt.

Peter misses things. He shows up late, egregiously late, or sometimes, he doesn't show at all. Ned doesn't seem all that bothered by it when Harry brings it up, and he tries not to take it personally, especially when Peter always shows up later, apologizing profusely and swearing to make it up to him.

The excuses are running a little thin, though. There's only so many times Harry can stand to hear, "Sorry, Har, Mr. Stark needed me for something - confidential project, sorry, sorry - " before he marches into Stark Tower and demands answers. He's not bold enough to think he could make it all the way to Tony Stark, but he thinks he has enough bluster to make it to HR.

Peter looks tired. At first, Harry thinks maybe it's nightmares? Stress? He died and came back in the middle of an Avengers level firefight, Harry wouldn't begrudge him a little PTSD. He offers, gently, for Peter to talk about it if he wants to, or distraction, if he doesn't.

"I'm a pretty good listener, you know." Harry points out, trying to keep it light, but the strained smile on Peter's face makes him wonder whether or not he's succeeded. "I mean, what you saw, Pete, that's a lot for anyone."

Peter sighs and looks out over the water - they're walking by the river today, cold breeze turning their cheeks pink. He's already offered Peter his scarf twice, but he doesn't seem to mind the cold. "I was there, you know. After it happened. When Mr. Stark..."

"When he lost his arm." Harry finishes, so Peter doesn't have to. Peter nods and continues looking out over the water. Harry wonders if he's seeing something else entirely.

"I was there when his heart stopped. When they had to resuscitate and - and when - that happened." Peter's fingers tighten on the railing, and Harry just watches, waiting. "He was so still, Harry, I've never seen him - he doesn't stop moving, you know, like ever. He was so still."

"He's alive, Pete." Harry reminds him gently, touching Peter's elbow. Peter finally looks at him and smiles, even though it's brittle. Harry looks at him and sees a well of secrets - there is more there than he lets on, and Peter has never been subtle. So he lets it be, because clearly Peter wants to move on, and Harry doesn't begrudge him that, either.

But then the tardiness continues. Peter gets later, and later, until Harry stops waiting. He's not angry, not really, but he's frustrated, and the worst part is that Peter always seems so genuinely apologetic, like it really is completely out of his control, but it's - well, it's ridiculous.

Peter misses the volunteer time he'd signed up for with Harry at the shelter for the third time that month, and Harry sees red. He goes to Ned first, because Ned always has a level head and surely, he'll have decent advice about how to confront Peter - but to Harry's astonishment, Ned's advice is not to confront him at all.

"He's been like this, man, since before like, everything." Ned's bouncing small basketball against the wall of his bedroom as Harry just stares at him, dumbfounded. "That's just, you know, Peter."

"But - why?" He's been thrown for a loop, utterly perplexed. If it's not because of the Snap or the

Dusting or whatever the hell they're calling it these days, then what is it? Harry catches Ned's ball on the next throw, pointing at him seriously. "And if you say the Stark Internship, I swear to *God* -"

"Well, it is!" Ned says defensively, but there's a false note in his tone that makes Harry do a double take. Ned looks - he looks nervous, and he's not looking Harry in the eye anymore. "It is, Mr. Stark keeps him really busy, like really, really busy."

"So I've heard." Harry stares at Ned a few moments longer. The other boy shifts uncomfortably in his chair, and the rush of clarity that Ned and Peter are hiding something from him is swift and decisive.

But he doesn't pursue it because - because it *hurts*. He thought they were friends - not just Peter, but the three of them. He thought they trusted him, and he trusted them and it - it *sucks*, the sudden harshness of realizing there is a door he cannot enter.

(A door he's not good enough to enter, maybe. He is not kind like Ned, he is not brilliant and warm like Peter. He is lost, or maybe his father is right and the things he wants, he is not meant for. No matter how badly he wants them.)

"Peter and Ned are hiding something," Harry tells MJ, while the two of them wait for Peter at the coffee shop they frequent on Thursdays. She rarely looks up from her book when it's just the two of them, and she doesn't now, save for the flicker of her flinty eyes (they seem to soften when she looks at Peter) as she glances up at him in private amusement, then back down to her page. He doesn't know why he says it - it's not like he's come to expect any level of comfort from her. Maybe it's a desperate, last-ditch attempt to not feel shuttered out in the cold (and really, if he's going to MJ for that, he's desperate indeed).

"Obviously." She intones, bored, and flips a page (just for the punctuation, he thinks). "Took you long enough."

"Do you know what it is?" Harry asks, because he can't not, and this time, MJ does look up from her book, unimpressed.

"Do I look like I care, Osborn? Seriously, tell me, that's something that needs to be rectified immediately if I do."

Harry says nothing, and she returns to her book. Peter never shows.

Harry loses his virginity at 19.

It's terrible. He's drunk out of his mind at some party on campus - or maybe it's off-campus (he doesn't even know, that's how drunk he is). The boy invites him to come out and dance from where he's being a wallflower, and Harry would have refused except - he has Jack's bright blue eyes and a surfeit of curly brown hair (he does not think of who that reminds him of, he won't, he can't, soft brown curls that flop down over his forehead--), so Harry downs the last of his drink and says "Yes," and the boy takes his hand and leads him out into the crowd.

He's not good at dancing, so he downs another shot in between songs, and then another, and then a third, until dancing ceases to matter and Harry has enough liquid courage to press his mouth to his new friend's.

It's his first kiss, and it's messy. There's too much tongue and the other boy tastes like cheap beer, but Harry keeps going because there's something thrilling about it, too; about doing something for the first time, something he knows Norman would not want him to be doing.

(And doesn't it feel like everything he does these days, he does for his father? This may not be right, but it's for himself, and that counts for something.)

The boy asks him if he wants to get out of there in a husky whisper, breath hot against his ear, and Harry confirms that yes, he does. The rest is a blur of drunken arousal and naked skin. It's not the best sex in the world, but it's not bad (though, his bar isn't exactly the most accurate with zero sample sizes to compare from).

Except the next morning, it is bad. He wakes up in an unfamiliar bed and realizes he doesn't know the name of the person blissfully asleep next to him. He feels nothing, it meant *nothing*.

He doesn't go to parties anymore. Instead, he spends more time with his father.

“So, I need to ask you something.” It’s not exactly a promising opening, especially with the way Peter’s twisting his hands, but Harry just raises an eyebrow at him as they walk leisurely by the river.

“The suspense is killing me, Pete, say something.” Peter looks down at his hands, then out at the river, then back down at his hands. Harry smiles privately as they stop by the waterfront, and he reaches out to free Peter’s poor wrist from his tight grip. He links their fingers together, like he always has, and Peter can’t help but smile, relaxing despite his nerves. Their easy affection hasn’t been weird for years, and Harry doesn’t second-guess it now (even if his heart does have an irregular rhythm, for the briefest of moments).

“I want to ask MJ to prom.” Peter’s chewing on his lower lip, distressed, and he finally makes eye contact with Harry, his anxiety revealed. Harry keeps the encouraging smile in place (not without effort), waiting for Peter to continue. “But I’m worried she’ll say no, and I’ll ruin everything.”

“If anyone was going to be weird after turning down a prom date, it wouldn’t be Michelle.” Harry doesn’t dare call her MJ even when she’s not around to hear him. He feels like she’d find out somehow, regardless. “Besides, I don’t think she’ll turn you down.”

“Really? You think - you think she likes me?” Harry wonders if Peter’s lip is going to start bleeding, the way he’s biting down on it. He squeezes Peter’s hand tightly, nodding.

“I’m pretty sure it’s impossible not to like you, Pete. You’re a total catch. The whole package, really.”

Peter snorts, eyeing him like he just claimed the moon was made of cheese. Harry raises his eyebrow again, daring him to challenge him.

He does, of course. “Easy for you to say when you’re a handsome college guy. I’m just, you know, me. Plain old Peter Parker.”

There is nothing plain about you, Harry thinks, but does not say (there are so many things he does not say, things he will never say). This is the boy who took his hand and showed him how to build a sandcastle. There is nothing plain about that. Not to Harry.

Instead, he says, “Trust me, okay? Ask her. Don’t do any ridiculous promposal, she’ll hate it. Do

something special, something just for her.”

Peter takes a deep breath, and some of the tension in his shoulders relaxes. He smiles toothily, genuine happiness. “Okay. I think - I think I will. Thank you.”

“Any time, Pete.” Harry says, and he means it. If there are things that lurk beneath the surface, he will never admit to them, not even in the privacy of his own mind - but even if he did, it wouldn’t matter. He wants Peter to be happy, and Harry could never be anything other than happy himself, if Peter is happy.

(Harry has always known how to hide, how to carve out shells and leave pieces of himself inside them for safekeeping, and this is no different - except Peter is not sharp edges like Norman. Peter is a flame, burning too bright and too hot, and it sears Harry’s skin if he gets too close.)

Peter asks MJ to prom by leaving clues throughout the library that lead to a cypher for her favorite book, and a pressed rose between the pages. She ribs him for participating in the archaic, patriarchally-rooted ritual of giving a woman flowers, but she accepts, all the same.

(The one person Harry cannot seem to hide from is MJ, who smiles at him with knowing in her eyes the next time they meet at the coffee shop, after the promposal. She is holding hands with Peter beneath the table, and his heart does not ache with jealousy, not now; it simply aches. It is bittersweet in some ways, but Harry has already lived a worse reality.)

Peter’s hurt. Again.

He’s favoring his left side, and there’s a bruise on his jaw that Harry does not, for one single, solitary second, buy as tripping down the stairs. It looks like a punch, and Peter flails when Harry points this out to him.

“A - a punch, Harry, are you crazy? Who would I be punching? How do you even know that?” His following laugh is high and anxious, and Harry stares at him, unimpressed.

“I went to a British boarding school for rich assholes, you think I don’t know what a punch looks like? It was literally Lord of the Flies, Pete.” It wasn’t, though he’s not lying about seeing a few

punches - but it has the desired effect of deflating Peter's bravado. Harry crosses his arms, wondering if there are other bruises he can't see. He hates that he has to wonder about that, but he does. "Was it Flash? Tell me it was Flash, I've been dying to feed him a knuckle sandwich."

"That's - please never say that again, what is this, an Afterschool Special? I'm fine, Har, 1000% fine, take a chill pill." Peter runs a hand through his hair, always twitchy. "Are you done interrogating me about a stupid bruise? I'm a klutz, I could hurt myself in a room of pillows. This is known."

He wants to ask, *would it kill you to be honest with me for five seconds?*, but he doesn't. The list of things he doesn't say grows longer by the day, but still. Harry refrains.

"Harry!" Norman's voice floats down to them from the second floor of the Osborn penthouse, and he steps out of his study with a sheaf of papers. The boys turn to look up, and Peter holds a hand up in greeting.

"Hey, Mr. Osborn!" Peter smiles at him, and Norman smiles back, congenial as ever (with everybody who isn't Harry, it seems; but since his entry into Empire State's program, things have been getting easier - it's always easier when your will matches Norman's, Harry finds).

"Hello, Peter, I didn't realize you were here. How's your aunt?" Norman descends slowly, eyes flickering back down to the papers in his hands. He can't even put down the work for two seconds to exchange smalltalk with a kid he's known since practically birth. Harry's not surprised, at this point; and neither is Peter, who's known Norman long enough not to take it personally.

"Oh she's fine, she's fine. How are you? How's Oscorp?" Peter also knows to skip straight to the only thing his father actually knows how to talk about, and Harry ducks his head to hide a smile when Peter turns to catch his eye after posing the question.

"Very good, very good. Harry's doing a lot of good work, incredible work." Norman's hand claps down on his shoulder firmly, *proudly*, and Harry can't help but straighten a little. His father is happy with him and - Harry can't lie. It's a good feeling. "I can only hope he's keeping you well-informed, you know we'd be honored to poach you from Stark when you get to the collegiate level."

"Ah, well," Peter laughs again, rubbing a hand against the back of his neck, flustered. "That's really nice of you to say, Mr. Osborn, but I'm not - "

“Stark Industries doesn’t have a biochemical focus, they don’t even have a biochemical department, really.” Norman cuts in, ever the salesman. “That’s always been your passion, right Pete? Organics? Who is better than Oscorp?”

“No one, sir.” Harry pipes up, and Norman winks at the both of them, patting Harry’s shoulder.

“Of course not. You think about that, Pete, about your future. Oscorp is the future. And don’t be a stranger! Come by the labs sometime, Harry will show you where all the fun is.” And with that, Norman departs, muttering something under his breath as he looks through his papers. Harry shakes his head to himself and fixes Peter with a look.

“Honestly, if you ever do want a tour, I’d be more than happy to take you.”

There’s some private amusement in Peter’s expression, something Harry’s never really seen before, and it hides in his eyes, the corners of his mouth. “Thanks, Harry. That’s really cool - I’ll keep it in mind.”

Something about his tone suggests the very opposite, but Harry doesn’t call him on it. There is a bruise on Peter’s jaw, his father is pleased with him, and Harry doesn’t say a word.

Peter, Ned, and MJ graduate. Harry sits next to May and wolf-whistles as loud as he can when they each walk the stage. She cries the entire time, and Harry sacrifices his handkerchief to her one-woman brass section. A curious figure takes the seat on May’s opposite side, and it takes Harry a second to recognize that it’s Tony Stark.

He looks different. Well, he’s in disguise, for one - a long-sleeved suit and gloves, and a hat, pulled down low. He’s also sporting a salt and pepper beard that’s more salt than pepper, and dark sunglasses - unusual, compared to his infamous orange and yellow lenses.

Harry thinks May must have known he was coming, too, when he realizes they’re seated at the back, not unintentionally (perhaps Peter is not the only one keeping secrets).

Tony only stays through Peter’s walk, cheering loud enough to turn a few heads, but Harry watches May smile and murmur to him throughout the ceremony - watches as Tony squeezes her hand in

his gloved one. Then he's gone, a bodyguard with a suspiciously Tony-Stark-shaped goatee falling into step behind him, and Harry isn't sure whether or not he's allowed to ask about it.

There are plenty of festivities afterwards, and Harry trails after the rest of the gang as they make the rounds at friends' parties. There is cake to eat and congratulations to give, and the day is all the more treasured, knowing that it almost never came to pass at all.

"So, did you commit to a school yet?" Harry asks, pushing Peter's tassel out of his face - yes, he's wearing the graduation cap. Peter had plonked it on his head and proclaimed him an honorary graduate today, since he never did get to walk a stage. "MIT and Empire, you've got your pick of the best, Pete. Tough choice."

"Not really," Peter shrugs, pointer finger swirling idly around the rim of his red solo cup. "My life is here, in New York. May's here, you're here, MJ's going to Columbia - I can't go to Massachusetts. I have - responsibilities here. I can't just leave."

"What about Ned? Isn't he committed to MIT?" That's not exactly a surprise, either. Ned is an absolute genius in his own right, Harry has seen his robotics and coding applications. Peter sighs and slumps in his seat - clearly this is a conversation he's had multiple times already, if not multiple times this week.

"Yeah. But that's - I mean, Empire is in-state tuition. That's another consideration." Harry raises an eyebrow, and Peter twitches, like he knows he's been caught. They're the same price, which is, yes, expensive as hell, but that's the cost of going to a crazy genius school. Eventually, Peter relents, huffing and sinking back in his chair. "...Empire's offering me money, though."

"I'm not saying Empire is a bad school, Pete. Hell, I'd be delighted if you joined me at ES." Harry leans forward, bracing his forearms on his knees. "But you have to think about what's going to be good for *you*, not what's good for other people. I know you've always loved biochem, and Empire is a fantastic school for that. MIT is a technology school, and they have a great science program - but yeah, Empire is a better bet for organics. But...you've been spending a lot of time with your Stark Internship these past couple years. It's okay if your dreams have changed, you know?"

"They haven't changed." Peter assures him, running a hand back through his hair and blowing out a deep breath. "What's best for me is to stay in New York. Just...trust me, okay? Empire is where I'm meant to be."

Harry stares at him for a long moment before he cracks a smile. "You're not gonna catch me complaining. You'll look great in maple red."

“Yeah, I will.” Peter agrees with a quiet snort. “Red’s totally my color.”

Harry’s phone rings at 2:30 in the morning, and he wants to die.

It’s sophomore year, two weeks into first term, and Harry’s already over the amount of work piled on his plate. He’s never been fond of math, something that is unfortunately a core principle upon which both his major and minor are based. He’s only been asleep for an hour and a half, and he does not appreciate the interruption.

“What?” Harry snaps as he answers, squinting grumpily at the blue light of his cell phone. It’s Peter, which is the only reason he answered.

“Uh, hello?” An unfamiliar voice asks over the line, and Harry’s blood turns to ice. His mind is already racing past the Worst Case Scenarios to Even Worse Scenarios. “Is this Harry?”

“Speaking.” Harry manages to choke out, sitting up dizzily fast. “Who is this? Where’s Peter?”

“Oh is this - is that his name? Peter?” There’s a muted noise he can’t make out from the other end of the line, but the other person makes an affirmative noise. “Sorry, sorry - is Peter your friend? He’s totally wasted, man, he’s a mess. He asked us to call ‘Harry’ and we just - we told Siri to call you, he can’t even unlock his phone. Can you, like - come get him? Or - I guess we could put him in an Uber, maybe - ”

“I’ll come.” Harry says quickly, tripping over himself to get out of bed. The penthouse is not far from Empire’s campus, a ten minute walk at best. Five if he takes a cab, which he will, with Peter inebriated. “I’m not far. Is he - like, is he sick? Do you think he needs a hospital?”

“No, no. Well - Adam, what do you think?” The person on the other end of the line has a brief side conversation with someone else who is, apparently, helping out with the situation, as Harry pulls on a pair of sweatpants and digs around his laundry for his wallet. “Yeah, no he’s like, awake and stuff. He’s still coherent, he just - you know, can’t get home on his own.”

“Right, right. I’ll be right there. And - thank you for calling me.” Harry must sound a little too relieved, because the person on the other end of the line chuckles and says, “Sure man, no problem.” before hanging up.

As it turns out, they’re right. Peter can’t get home on his own - hell, he can’t even get up off the lawn. He’s on his back in the grass with two frat dudes staring down at him. Harry sighs to himself and hands the cabbie a \$50 bill, asking him to wait.

“Pete, what the hell.” Harry shakes his head as Peter smiles at him, eyes glazed over with whatever the hell he imbibed. He reaches out to Harry, still laying there - clearly his depth perception is off, because he misses by several inches. The two frat dudes - Adam, and the other one who called him - tilt their heads at them. “I’ve got him from here. Thanks, again.”

“No problem. Kid was drinking like a monster. You need a hand getting him into the car?” Harry shakes his head and the two of them shrug before turning to go back into the house. He crouches down next to Peter’s head, ruffling his hair to get Peter to look at him. “Since when are you a party boy?”

Peter doesn’t answer, closing his eyes and humming to himself, and Harry heaves another sigh. It’s a normal thing, getting drunk at a party - but something twists in his stomach uncomfortably. Yeah, it’s normal to get drunk at a party - but it’s not normal for *Peter*. It just...doesn’t seem like something he would do. And yet. “Alright, Pete, up and at ‘em.”

“No, no, no,” Peter waves him off, batting at the hand Harry tries to offer him. It’s nearly 3AM, and Peter’s refusing to get up off the lawn. Great. “No, no...I want to look at the stars. I wanted - I wanted you to look with me.”

“Dude, come on.” Harry tugs at his arm, but Peter doesn’t budge. Huffing to himself, Harry sits on the grass, leveling Peter with an unimpressed look. “Alright, we’re looking at the stars. Great. So many stars to see in New York City, Pete, wow. Light pollution isn’t a problem at all.”

Peter’s quiet for a long moment, so long Harry almost wonders if he’s fallen asleep with his eyes open, and just as he’s about to interrupt this drunken, philosophical moment, Peter says, “I was dead, you know.”

Harry’s chest constricts again with that awful, sinking, frozen feeling, and it takes a second for him to remember how his lungs work. He chances a glance at Peter’s face - he doesn’t seem upset, just neutral, and Harry’s not sure if that’s scarier. “...yeah, I know.”

“I was dead,” Peter says slowly, as if the sentence doesn’t taste right. “And now I’m not. But sometimes - sometimes I still feel like -”

Peter sighs and Harry is frozen, frozen listening to the sadness in Peter’s tone, sadness too old for someone that young (but hasn’t it always been this way, for them?)

“Sometimes I can feel it, Harry.” Peter’s voice is lowered to a whisper, and his eyes aren’t glazed over, now, when they fix on Harry’s. “Sometimes I can feel myself...going away. Crumbling. Like I’m - made of pencil shavings. And then I’m not, but - but I *was*, you know? I was. And sometimes I wonder...if I ever came back at all. If this is real.”

“This is real.” Harry finds his voice hastily, and he takes Peter’s hand in both of his. It’s easier to pretend he’s not shaking when he’s holding Peter’s hand firmly. “You’re real. You’re here, with me. And you’re not - you’re not going to crumble again. I won’t let you.”

“Yeah?” Peter smiles at him, tears welling up in his eyes, leaking from the corners and rolling down the side of his face towards the grass. “You gonna stop me, Osborn?”

“Somebody has to. You’re a public menace.” Peter laughs, wet and bittersweet, and Harry discreetly wipes away his own tears on his sleeve.

“I’ve got - I’ve got this responsibility, I’ve got to - I’ve got to help. I’ve got to help people. But what if I can’t? I can’t even - I can’t even help myself.” Peter sniffs, squeezing Harry’s hand so tight it almost hurts. “I’m scared, Harry.”

“Me too.” Harry admits, because it’s always been true. (He has always been scared.) “But we keep going anyway. And that’s...that’s part of being alive.”

“Courage is not the absence of fear,” Peter quotes with a soft smile. “But the ability to act in spite of it.”

“MJ finally made you read Mark Twain, huh?” Harry says knowingly, nudging Peter’s shoulder, and he nods, finally moving to sit up. “Well he’s right. And Peter - you’re the bravest person I’ve ever known.”

“Funny.” Peter’s eyes shine, and his side presses into Harry’s as he leans on him, head tilted up towards the stars they can’t see. “I was just about to say the same thing.”

Harry meets Spiderman on a Thursday.

He’s on his way back to the penthouse after a study session with Peter - it’s nearing midterms, and the professors aren’t going easy on them just because next week is Thanksgiving. It’s bitterly cold in New York this time of year (he swears, it gets colder every year), and Harry has his peacoat bundled tightly, hands jammed deep into his pockets.

He turns off of campus onto the street and is immediately hit with an awful smell. It stops him in his tracks, and he takes in the city workers, clearly in the middle of something sewage related. He tries not to gag, considers walking through the mess of orange cones and men in vis-vests, and then looks to the graffitied alleyway. He probably shouldn’t go down there, even if it would take him around this mess and probably get him home faster. But...it’s cold.

Harry takes the alleyway. (He almost makes it, too.)

In the end, someone jumps out at him from behind a dumpster. They grab him and throw him against the rough brick wall of the adjacent building, and before he can so much as yell in surprise, there’s a knife against his throat and a hard fist in his stomach, knocking the air out of him. Harry coughs, eyes watering, and blinks away the pain to focus on his assailant.

“Not a word, or you’re dead.” The voice is gruff, cold, and Harry just jerks his head in an affirmative nod. Not worth it. Let the guy take his wallet, everything in there is easily replaced -

There’s a rush of wind and a “Shit!” hissed from the mouth of his attacker, and Harry can’t even really process the blur of red and blue before the mugger’s knife slips. He stumbles back in pain, hand flying to the jagged line of torn flesh on his collarbone. Harry looks up, back braced against the corner of the dumpster, as the scene in front of him morphs into something that makes a little more sense.

It’s Spiderman, standing over the man who mugged him - the mugger who suddenly looks a lot less menacing. Spiderman kicks the knife out of the guy’s hand. His shoulders are tense, rigid with - well, if Harry didn’t know any better, he’d say the hero looked *angry*.

The guy's yelling profanities now, cursing out Spiderman and the cops and Spiderman's mother. He gets all of his limbs stuck to the pavement with Spiderman's webbing for his troubles. Last is the guy's mouth, turning the screaming into livid, muffled noises, and Spiderman crouches down low over him. The eyepieces of his mask *whirr* as they narrow.

"If you *ever* try that again, I *will* find you." Harry's eyes widen - he was right, Spiderman sounds *pissed*. Wasn't he supposed to be like, the wise-cracker? Spiderman punches the concrete next to the mugger's head and it crumbles, leaving an indentation whose only purpose must have been to intimidate.

Harry can feel his heartbeat quicken when Spiderman turns around slowly, lenses whirring again as he focuses on Harry. He holds his hands up non-threateningly, taking a slow step forward. "Are you okay?"

"I'm - I'm okay. Thank you for - uh - " Harry tries to stand up straighter and his knees buckle. Spiderman is there before he can blink, catching his elbow, and Harry hisses involuntarily when it jostles his cut. He pulls his hand away (distantly, he realizes he's shaking), and sees that his palm is stained completely red. "...Oh no."

His legs almost completely give out, at that, but Spiderman bears his weight and lowers him to the ground. The lenses are as wide as they can go, now, and Harry idly notes just how expressive this guy in a mask really is. He closes his eyes with a wince, trying not to barf (he's...never really been the best with blood, okay?)

"Hey! Hey, please, please don't - don't fall asleep, okay?" Spiderman's grip tightens, and he shakes Harry a little bit, the fear in his voice climbing. "Hey! Harry - Harry!"

The realization hits him like a douse of cold water, chasing all other thoughts right out of his head. He would recognize his name coming from that voice anywhere, mask be damned. Harry opens his eyes, barely feeling the pain anymore.

All the injuries, all the running late, the poorly-concealed lying, the need to stay in New York above all else - the world shifts into place so suddenly and swiftly, he almost feels dizzy.

"*Peter.*"

Spiderman freezes, and Harry doesn't know how he didn't see it before, watching the news. Every mannerism, every joke, hell, the tone of Spiderman's voice - it's all Peter, of course it's Peter. Helping old ladies across the street, rescuing cats from trees - *of course it's Peter*.

(The thing is, he might have stopped drawing it, but Peter never did stop fighting dragons.)

"Fuck." Harry says, right before he passes out.

Harry wakes up to Bruce Banner hovering over him.

"Where's Peter?" He tries to ask, but his mouth feels like it's full of cotton balls (and tastes even worse), so it comes out more garbled than he intended. Bruce keeps a firm hand on Harry's shoulder, pinning him in place. He tries to ask again, shoving at Bruce's hand. "Where is he?"

"I need you to relax. Please, lay down." Bruce urges, but Harry shoves at him again, harder. Like hell is he going to relax until he gets some answers, thank you very much.

"Where *is* he?" Harry demands, mustering up every ounce of authority he has. It comes out sounding harsh, snappy and cutting, and not altogether unlike his father. He doesn't care, as long as it gets him what he wants (which, coincidentally, is also not unlike Norman).

"Where's who?" Bruce asks, finally able to make sense of Harry's questions. Bruce sounds nervous, like he doesn't know how to bluff his way out of a paper bag, and Harry already knew he was right, but now he's absolutely certain. Harry shoves at Bruce's hand again, successfully dislodging it, and tries to sit up. "Hey, no, you need to lay down -"

"Spiderman! Peter Parker! Where is he!" Harry's had enough, not just of Bruce - but the lies, the secrecy, it turns his stomach. How many years has this been going on? How many times has Peter lied to his face? How many times has he been inches away from losing his best friend, and Harry hadn't even known? Did Ned know - did MJ know? Did May know? Why hadn't he seen it, was he really this oblivious? Harry ignores the dull, throbbing pain in his collarbone, finally managing to sit up under his own power. "Bring him here now, or I'm finding him myself!"

"Okay - Okay!" Bruce throws his hands up in surrender, hovering over Harry's shoulders. "I'll - lay

down, and I'll go and get him, okay? Just lay down, and don't rip your stitches. It's not deep, but a knife to the clavicle isn't something to scoff at."

Harry eyes him distrustfully, but stops trying to get up out of the bed. Bruce, apparently, decides to count that as a win and sighs, shoulders slumping. He pushes his glasses to the top of his head, rubs at the bridge of his nose, and goes to make good on his promise.

The door opens again in record time, and Peter edges in warily. He looks unharmed, but he also looks guilty as hell, which is just another nail in the coffin of knowledge Harry already possesses. He approaches Harry slowly, stopping at the foot of the hospital bed.

Harry stares. He has so many questions. He wants to ask, above all else, *why does it have to be you?* but it's not a question worth voicing. Of course it's Peter. It's less of a surprise and more of an inevitability. People like Ben, like Peter, they have kindness in their hearts.

(Harry has rage, a deep well of desperation that he swallows down like castor oil - but he is not kind, not like Peter. *Then again*, he thinks, *few people are.*)

They're silent, for a long moment, and Harry can see the worry so clearly in Peter's expression that it's really not a question of what he should say.

Harry's angry, he's hurt - but Peter is scared. Harry never wants Peter to be scared, least of all of him.

"Who else knows?" Harry finally asks, his tone devoid of accusation, and that seems to be the permission Peter needs for the dam to break. He edges closer, coming around the side of Harry's hospital bed, hands tugging nervously at the sleeves of his Stark Industries hoodie. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wanted to protect you." Peter tells him, and it hurts because it's honest. Harry can see it in his face. "People get hurt because of me, Harry, I didn't want that to happen to you."

(He does not say, *but I thought we protected each other* and he definitely does not say *nothing could ever hurt me more than you leaving again*, no matter how true it may be.)

"Who else knows?" Harry presses, because he needs to know. Peter looks away and his stomach

sinks, hard. "Peter. Who else?"

"Ned. And...MJ. And May. Uh - Tony. Tony Stark, and some of the Avengers."

So literally everybody else, then. Why not him? Why was he the last to know? (Why was he not *good enough*?)

"I knew something was off this whole time but," Harry replies with a sigh. "I just thought you didn't trust me."

"Why would you think that?" Peter's totally, genuinely confused, and Harry throws his hands up despite the ache in his collarbone, the first signs of frustration bleeding through.

"Oh, I don't know, because you told Ned and not me? Ned who, by the way, is a terrible liar? You told *everyone* and not me, Pete. I thought - I thought we were best friends, the three of us, and meanwhile you're keeping this secret with Ned and I didn't - I didn't think it would be like *this*!"

"I'm sorry." It's all Peter has to offer and it sounds hollow; it is, pitifully, not enough. But it's all he has, and he's giving it to Harry anyway. "I'm so sorry, Harry."

"Yeah, Pete." Harry's exhausted by this entire conversation, fist clenched in his lap to keep him from yelling things that won't help either of them. "Me too."

They sit there uncomfortably for...a while. Peter explains in bits and pieces about what happened to make him Spiderman - and despite how deliberately vague he's being, suddenly, Peter's evasiveness about visiting the labs or working for Oscorp make a lot more sense.

Bruce comes in an hour or so later to tell Peter his Aunt is here, and Peter goes to explain the situation to her. Harry closes his eyes against the impending stress headache, leaning back against the pillows and wishing, futilely, that his life would stop being so ridiculously complicated.

"Harry Osborn, huh." The voice startles him, and Harry's eyes fly open with a jolt. He didn't even

hear him come in, but there he sits: Tony Stark, in the flesh.

Well, mostly flesh. His right arm is a familiar red and gold, a top of the line prosthesis developed, designed, and built by Stark himself. Harry's gaze flickers from the arm back up to Tony's face, not wanting to be rude. Tony is eyeing him, face almost unreadable, save for the slight downturn in his mouth. It says, *I don't like you*. Harry decidedly doesn't snort to himself as he thinks, *I don't even like myself most of the time, you're not special*.

"Never realized Peter's friend Harry was you, kid." Tony leans back in his seat next to the hospital bed, fingers of his flesh hand drumming idly on the arm of the chair. Harry just stares, silent. His father has always said he doesn't need to be ashamed of where he comes from, and he refuses to be now. It's not his fault Oscorp and Stark Industries have been at odds for years - that Oscorp's biochemical and medical applications have outstripped Stark Industries, and that the opposite is true of Stark Industries' technological advancements. But his last name is still Osborn, and it always will be. He is his father's son.

(You can't choose your family, after all.)

"But then," Tony sighs and shrugs, the metal of where the arm meets his shoulder whirring slightly as it adjusts to accommodate the movement. "Peter's always full of surprises."

"Bit of an understatement." Harry can't help but grumble, looking away from Tony to scowl slightly at the bedsheets. They're silent for a long minute, and then Tony shifts again, crossing one leg over the other.

"Yeah, I guess it is." Tony's fingers *drum, drum, drum*. Harry wonders what the point of this is. He already knows he is not good enough, not kind enough, not smart enough. He is not *enough*. He is simply Harry Osborn.

"You know," Tony starts again, and his tone pulls Harry's attention back up from the bedsheets to Tony's face. "This isn't going to be easy."

"...what isn't?" Harry can't help but ask, blinking at Tony in confusion. Tony's eyes are not the same shade of brown as Peter's, but they are just as expressive; and while the slight distrust remains, it is overwhelmed by honesty.

"This. Knowing about Spiderman." Tony leans forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. "When

he runs headfirst into a burning building. When he shows up bleeding and bruised, and you know it's because someone was trying to hurt him. He fights mad men on national TV, and he will go places you can't follow. Watching him put himself out on the line, it's not going to be easy."

"So, what, I should just give up?" Harry's temper flares, but Tony just smiles at him. It's not a smile meant for him, but it's enough to throw him, anyway. "...I'm not going to do that."

"I didn't think that you would." Tony moves to stand, leaning subtly against the railing of Harry's bed. This is the man that saved the universe, and he retired for a reason. Harry swallows as Tony takes a second to regain his equilibrium (it's not just Harry who cannot follow, it seems.) "But you can see why he wanted to spare you that, can't you?"

Harry's quiet for a long moment, and Tony nods to himself, crossing the room back towards the door. Harry speaks up before he can leave, fingers twisted in the hospital sheets. "He can't, though. I was already worried, when he showed up with a black eye or he'd disappear randomly. I just didn't know *why*."

"I know. I know he can't." Tony says, glancing at him from the door. "But it's Peter. He tries to protect everybody, anyway."

And, well. Harry can't argue with that.

He calls Ned and MJ to the coffee shop the following week; his stitches are still healing, but they're not as gnarly-looking now. He sits them down, MJ with her tea, Ned with a hot chocolate moustache, and announces. "I know."

"Know what?" Ned asks, immediately nervous. Harry seriously has no idea how he didn't see through Ned completely before.

MJ just raises an eyebrow and sips her tea for effect, cool as a cucumber. "Welcome to the club, Osborn."

"Thanks." Harry stirs his coffee idly, watching the swirl. "How long did you know, Michelle? I know Ned knew, but...did Peter tell you?"

“He did. Sometime around graduation.” She shrugs, and Harry tries not to let it sting. He knows Peter didn’t mean any harm. “But I already figured it out before that. He’s a terrible liar.”

“Don’t let her fool you, she totally freaked out.” MJ reaches over to punch Ned in the arm, and Harry hides a smile in his coffee. Ned snorts and rubs at the area, rolling his eyes playfully.

“I *knew*, Leeds, and don’t you forget it.” She turns to Harry, intense gaze flickering over his amused expression. “And call me MJ.”

Harry can’t help the surprise that overtakes him. “What - really?”

“Yeah.” She shrugs, and this time, the nonchalance is all faux. Harry smiles at her anyway. “All my friends do.”

Life goes on, and the years seem to pass quicker the older he gets. Harry’s courses get harder, his responsibilities at Oscorp doubling, then tripling, preparing him for the associate job he’ll step into when he graduates. He helps his father get a vaccine approved by the FDA and feels a sense of pride he never knew he was capable of. His father smiles at him, and he *gets* it, he understands why Norman does it - Harry’s helping people, and even if it may not be his first choice, it’s a *good* choice. He gets his first solo project, and May orders Mexican to celebrate (well, first she tries to cook Mexican, but that doesn’t exactly work out).

Peter and MJ break up, then get back together, then break up again. Harry and Ned keep a betting pool going, exchanging gossip like they’re in high school all over again, and they switch off telling Peter he’s an idiot. No matter how many times Peter screws up, though, Harry has no doubt he’ll be helping Peter ring shop as soon as they graduate.

As Tony warned him, it is not easy. Peter doesn’t make up excuses, anymore, but sometimes, the realities are indeed worse. The key difference, though, is that Harry is not alone in his worry - he has Ned and MJ and May, and the day Peter does actually run headfirst into a burning building on live television, Harry has to excuse himself to another room to laugh.

(It’s not funny, not at all, but he has to laugh, or he’s afraid he’ll cry.)

There are late nights studying and dumb fights and ridiculous pranks and death anniversaries. The tension of keeping his vigilantism a secret dissipates, and Harry is there to support Peter as much as he'll let him, even if it isn't easy. *Especially* when it isn't easy.

(Harry is not, generally, brave. But he has always been brave for Peter Parker.)

But life goes on. The years pass, and he feels like he blinked and he was standing there in a cap and gown, holding a diploma in his hand. His father beams proudly as Peter, MJ, and Ned cheer raucously, and Harry feels...good. It is not easy, but it's good.

Peter knocks on his window exactly one week after Harry graduates magna cum laude from Empire, and his hand leaves a bloody print smeared on the glass. Harry ushers him inside, practically diving for the first aid kit in the bathroom. It's a flesh wound, he's relieved to find, and the bleeding makes it look worse than it is, but it's still jarring to see when Peter peels the top of his suit off. His physique shouldn't be marred with blood like that; Harry doesn't let his eyes wander, feeling ill. He's never done well with blood.

It's not bad enough to go to Tony - well, Harry has a feeling Stark would argue that any injury is worth coming to him for, based on Peter's complaining about his mentor's helicopter parenting, and Harry has to (secretly) admit that he agrees with Tony wholeheartedly - but Harry's just glad Peter went to *someone*. It is curious, though, that Peter didn't go to MJ.

(She tells Harry and Ned, during their monthly phone calls, about the injuries Peter comes back to her sporting. Frankly, Harry thinks, he's lucky it's not worse.)

"We're uh, on a break." Harry raises an eyebrow as he holds a compress on the wound, slowing the bleeding. Peter sighs, not meeting his eyes. "...it's not really a break. We're...done. For good, I think."

"I'm sorry, Pete." Harry squeezes Peter's shoulder with his free hand, and Peter smiles sadly, rolling his head to lean back against the wall. "I know how much you two cared about each other."

"It's okay." Peter shrugs, then winces and thinks better of it. Harry removes the compress to start cleaning the wound. "It happens. We're still friends. It was a good...four years? Wow, four years."

(He wonders if there is a world out there without an MJ, without Harry, without Ned, without

Tony. A world where Peter is alone, where he resets his own shoulder blade, biting down on a leather belt, trying not to scream. A world where he digs a bullet out of his own leg, preparing a needle and thread with shaking fingers.

This world is not perfect, but it is not the worst imaginable.)

And life goes on.

He's in the middle of telling Peter about the new Oscorp project he's getting to oversee - the one his father told him was his, really, genuinely his, a new genetic programming tool that was lightyears above simple vaccinations - when Peter asks, suddenly, "Why don't you paint, anymore?"

"I - what?" Harry turns in Peter's desk chair, confused, and Peter looks at him upside down from where he's hanging from the top bunk of his bed. "Pete, I haven't painted in years."

"Yeah, I know. Just wondering why." Peter shrugs, and Harry frowns at him. It's not as off the cuff as Peter seems to think it is, because subtlety has never been Peter's strong suit.

"I don't know, I guess I just wasn't very good. So I stopped." Harry crosses his arms, still staring at Peter.

"But you were good, though. You probably still are." Peter twists to sit upright, tilting his head at Harry. "Do you not enjoy it?"

"Is there a point to this?" He doesn't mean to sound angry, but he kind of does, brow furrowing deeper as Harry tries to decipher Peter's meaning. It's literally been years, probably six or more at this point (and it doesn't exactly bring back *fond memories*). Why bring this up now?

"You were just so passionate about art. And now you're into Oscorp and everything with your dad but...I guess I just wonder if you're as passionate about that as you were about painting, you know, back then."

Harry is suddenly, viciously livid. He wants to say *since when the hell is it your business?* or *of course I am*, but he doesn't. (He doesn't lie to Peter, not when he can help it, even if Peter did not always extend him that same courtesy.) Instead, he says nothing, and Peter presses it with honest curiosity in his eyes. "Everything you're doing is great, Harry, it's really great but - I mean, don't you think some of this stuff might have other, more dangerous applications? You know, if it were...in the wrong hands?"

He can't exactly argue that, since Peter is pretty much *literally* living proof, and he's not going to. Harry shakes his head, shrugging with poorly disguised irritation. "It's genetic programming, Pete, it's cloning work. Yeah, people could do shitty stuff with this kind of technology, but you could say that about anything. I'm not going to debate ethics with you. Besides, that's not even close to what Oscorp is doing. The goal here is to clone organs, not people."

Peter doesn't look convinced, and it only furthers Harry's annoyance. Impatiently, he adds, cutting off whatever Peter's opening his mouth to say, "Imagine the lives you could save if every time someone needed an organ, we could clone a guaranteed match. No more organ donors required, no more long waiting lists for a match the host won't reject - you need an organ, sure, let me clone a DNA match tailored just to you. You're going to tell me that's not worth pursuing? If that's not 'the right hands', I don't know what is."

"That's not what I'm saying, Harry, I just have to wonder - I mean, with the lawsuits and everything...you never worry, at all?" Harry can feel his cheeks darkening, blotchy with the rising anger. Peter's innocent, imploring gaze isn't helping anything.

"Oscorp - my *father* won those lawsuits." Harry forces himself to reign back, feeling out of his depth. "What exactly are you implying?"

Peter stares at him for a long minute, and Harry can feel his shoulders getting tenser and tenser with each passing second. He doesn't want to be upset, but it hurts that Peter would have such little faith. Not just in Oscorp, but...in him. In Harry. "I'm not implying anything, man, it was just a question."

It wasn't, though. It wasn't just a question, and Harry's fingers clench into fists.

"Those lawsuits, they were bullshit, Pete, people lobbying for attention or money - they don't understand what we're - what *I'm* trying to achieve. What we're so close to achieving! A better future!" Harry's leaning forward now, dangerously close to tipping out of his chair, and Peter's eyes are wide with shock.

“You sound like him, you know. Like your dad.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing. Like he’s wrong, Pete, which he isn’t.” Sure, Norman could be intense, overbearing - but they were doing good. *Harry* was doing good, how could Peter not see that? To suggest anything otherwise was downright insulting. Harry stood up abruptly, knocking the chair back into the desk. “Maybe it’s time I leave.”

“No, Harry, come on, don’t be like that - ” Peter moves to swing down from the bunk, but Harry is already at the door, ready to flee.

“Be like what? Like my father? Trying to build something, something good? Maybe I’m not that crazy about science, maybe it’s not my *passion*, but where was art going to get me, anyway? What good is painting going to do, huh? Nothing. It’s *garbage*.” His knuckles are white on the doorknob, and Harry feels sick, sick to his stomach. “So no, Oscorp isn’t my passion, but it’s my legacy. And maybe I don’t mind helping people. Is that such a horrible thing?”

Peter looks shocked, and Harry’s practically vibrating with rage and disappointment and shame, but he swallows it all down and finishes, tersely, “There are worse fucking ways to spend your life. Maybe I don’t want to die with a bunch of stupid paintings and nothing else to show for it.”

“Harry-” Peter tries, but Harry leaves, slamming the door behind him.

He doesn’t talk to Peter for the next week and a half.

At first, Peter calls, and Harry just sends him to voicemail. He just - needs a minute to cool down. Every time he thinks he’s calmed down enough to talk to Peter, the thought of listening to his apologies makes the anger flare again. It’s just - that Harry tries, you know? He’s tried so damn hard to make his way in this world and maybe Oscorp *isn’t* his dream, but what does it matter? What’s the use of dredging that up again? This path has been committed to, and this is how his life is playing out. If he hadn’t made his decision a long time ago, he wouldn’t have a goddamn business degree with a minor in biochemical engineering.

“Something on your mind, Harry?” Norman asks over dinner, paperwork spread out on the long dining table between them. They don’t eat dinner together very often anymore - frankly, Harry’s lucky when Norman comes home for dinner at all and doesn’t just hole up in his lab - and when

they do, there's usually work there beside them. It's a little easier now that Harry's in on it; watching his father get excited over one breakthrough or another, working alongside him...it makes everything easier, really.

"Nothing important." Harry shrugs, pushing a piece of chicken around his plate idly. Norman sets down the folder he's holding and looks at Harry critically, the sharpness in his eyes familiar.

"Tell me." Harry tries not to wince at the command; he doesn't think Norman means to be so demanding - or maybe he does, but who knows, he's just always been that way. Harry runs a hand through his curls and pops the chicken in his mouth.

"Just had a frustrating conversation, that's all. The person just - didn't understand what we're trying to achieve." Norman nods thoughtfully, steepling his fingers, and Harry stares down at his plate.

"They never go away, Harry. Those people. They'll always be there." Norman's gaze fixes on him, makes Harry's neck burn, but he doesn't look up to meet it. "It may not feel like it, but I see it as a good thing. They'll always be there, pushing us forward. We *will* succeed, and when we do, then they'll see. Everyone who ever doubted - we'll prove them all wrong."

"Right." Harry agrees quietly, feeling slightly ill. He wonders if - he wonders if maybe Peter was right. At the very least, he thinks, watching Norman mutter darkly to himself about interlopers getting in the way of progress, perhaps him and his father aren't on the same page after all.

By the middle of the week, Harry's a little more stable. It's not Peter's fault; he didn't - and probably still doesn't - know how Harry feels about everything. He texts Peter to make up and suggests that they meet at the coffee shop, and Peter quickly agrees - but then, an hour before they're supposed to meet, Peter texts him to apologize profusely. One of his professors is keeping him, and they'll have to reschedule.

So they do - they reschedule for the following day, but then something comes up at work with his new project, and Harry's the one who has to cancel. The remainder of the week and a half is spent playing phone tag, but, at least, Harry's not all that angry anymore.

It's the end of the work day and Harry is beat, but he gets an email from Norman requesting his presence in the confidential labs, deep in the bowels of Oscorp. He's only ever had occasion to go down there once or twice; it's mainly boring, government-funded research that's kept in there, and Norman handles all of that personally. He doesn't know *why*, considering no one has been close to actually cracking Erksine's research since the man took it with him to his grave - the last attempt at

a successful super soldier serum ended in the Hulk, so. Still, his father seems to think there's something there; and if the government is going to continue funding their research, they'd be fools not to keep the contract.

Harry dutifully makes his way to the sub-floors, loosening his tie as he punches in his access code and descends. The lab is empty, when he gets there. He undoes the buttons on his cuffs before rolling up his sleeves, suppressing a sigh. He just wants to go home and have a long shower, maybe order some chinese food. Harry leans against one of the polished worktables, tapping his thumb against it. Seriously, where was his father?

Harry blinks, then frowns. There's something shiny, metallic, over by the sample cabinets. Surely that's not....?

But it is. There's an injector gun discarded there, carelessly, and when he walks over to it, he discovers that the test tube inside of it is empty. Harry turns it over in his hands, confused. Who would leave something like this lying out? What were they injecting, had a trial been started?

"Harry!" Norman's voice startles him, and Harry jumps, gun still in his hands. Norman's grinning wide, with a manic glint in his eye. It's not an unusual expression for his father, when he's particularly excited, but something about it makes Harry's stomach twist uneasily. This whole situation is strange.

"What's going on?" Harry asks, as Norman walks over and wraps an arm around his shoulders, steering him towards the door to the testing bay. "What are you doing down here?"

"Making history, my boy, that's what I'm doing. What *we're* doing, together. I wanted you to be here for it." Norman pats him on the back proudly, guiding him into the testing bay, and all of Harry's questions die in his throat when he spots the patch of gauze on the inside of Norman's elbow.

"Dad, did you - what did you do?" The numbing shock is swift and confusing, his mouth feels dry. Did he - inject something into himself? He must have, the evidence is right there - but why? What for? *What* did he do?

"It will make me stronger, Harry. It will make me better!" He doesn't even try to deny it. Norman grins, all teeth, and the grip he has on Harry's shoulders is almost painful, now. Harry can only stare at him, trying not to betray his horror. "I call it the Oz Formula. The blueprint from Erksine's research, his serum that was lost to time - I've improved it. With this, we can revolutionize modern medicine!"

“But that’s not all.” Norman holds up a finger, eyes crinkling at the corners, and Harry flounders, looking for something to say - that they probably need to get Norman to a hospital, for starters, if he injected himself with a formula that hasn’t been tested yet (Harry’s read the reports, and they were nowhere near human trials; *the last attempt at a successful super soldier serum ended in the Hulk*). “No, no that’s not all. Come and see for yourself.”

“...what is *that*?” Norman turns him to face the lab theatre, and Harry notices the black mass of wet goo, housed in a transparent containment unit in the center of the room. And it’s *moving*.

“His name -” Norman pulls him down the stairs, setting Harry right in front of the goo. It writhes against the glass, as if reaching out to him, and he tries to ignore the goosebumps rising on his skin. “- is Venom.”

“His *name*?” The only thing that stops him from taking a step back is his father hovering close. Norman steps right up to the glass, resting a hand against it, as if to console the creature. Harry doesn’t know when his father’s mania morphed into insanity, but the latter is very much present when Norman looks at him again.

“An intelligent symbiote! He holds the keys to unlocking everything we’ve been striving for!” Norman gestures to the black mass as it stretches up, up, up, pressing against every angle of the glass, trying to find a way out. “We’re on the brink of glory, my boy. Once we capture Spiderman, our bounds will be limitless!”

“Spiderman? What are you going to do with Spiderman?” Harry’s blood runs cold; he knows his mouth is hanging open in abject horror, but Norman doesn’t seem to notice.

(Harry wonders if this madness is inspired by the formula, but he knows that it isn’t. This psychosis has deep roots, growing thick and untamed beneath the soil.)

“We created him, you know.” Norman informs him, and Harry has to wonder how the hell his dad even knows that. *Does he know who Spiderman is? Does he know it’s Peter?* “It was *our* genetically engineered spiders that did it, it must have been. Proof that my years of research works! He belongs to us.”

Norman smiles and it holds a twisted approximation of glee. His fingers tap against the glass, and the symbiote lets out an awful, terrible screech that sounds like agreement. “I’m just taking back what’s rightfully mine.”

“Harry. My son, with whom I am well pleased.” Norman’s voice is sickly sweet when he turns back to Harry, arms spread wide, a mockery of welcome. His shark-like grin makes Harry’s skin crawl with fear in a way he’s never experienced before. “We will have our day, you and I. Together.”

Harry doesn’t move, not an inch, and Norman slinks forward. He’s suddenly very aware of the *danger* present in the air - this is not his father. This is something else entirely. Norman is no longer sharp edges, no; he is serrated, and anything that crosses his path will surely be left bleeding.

“Bring me Spiderman.” Norman commands, resting his palms on Harry’s shoulders. His fingers flex, and Harry stares at him, a mixture of stunned and relieved. *He doesn’t know*. “Do this for me. For *us*.”

Norman does not ask. And he is not a man easily refused.

“Yes, sir.”

When Harry gets home, he vomits.

He barely makes it to the bathroom. The ride back to the penthouse left him feeling numb, stuck in some deep, horrified state of shock. Stepping through the door, though, with Norman’s sinister masks staring back at him, the coldness of being well and truly alone, after that display in the lab - it hits him like a freight truck, and he trips over his own feet in his haste for the toilet bowl, bile rising quickly in his esophagus. It burns until he coughs himself into silence, chest heaving while his thoughts spiral down, down down.

He doesn’t know what to do. He has fought with his father, screamed and railed against him - but he has never been afraid, not like this. Afraid for what Norman could do, and equally as afraid for what could happen to him. Norman is not an easy man to love, but he is Harry’s *father*. He loves him, easy or not.

(You *cannot* choose your family.)

The panic is overwhelming, and Harry buries his face in his hands, trying not to scream. He has been quiet for so long, for *too long*, in the hopes that it would make everything easier, and yet - here they sit, on the brink of disaster.

(He is lost, he is nothing, what can he do? He is not like Peter, brilliant and brave. He is quiet and he is trapped and he always has been, it has always been this way.)

Everyone told him he would understand when he was older, but *I will never be old enough to understand this*, Harry thinks, stomach turning over again as he closes his eyes and sees the symbiote etched behind his eyelids, oozing and screeching, its very existence twisted and *wrong*. And Norman wanted to sacrifice Spiderman - wants to sacrifice Peter - to *that*.

Peter. Peter who is bright and warm and kind; Peter who is brown eyes sketched a thousand times over, who is a firm hand wrapped around Harry's. Peter has always been there, through everything, holding him, supporting him, making sure he did not fall, and Harry has always done the same.

Peter is the brave one, but Harry was brave, too, once upon a time. Harry opens his eyes and looks down at his hands; they are shaking, but they are fists and he can use them. He has no power, no plan, but he will keep going anyway.

("*Courage is not the absence of fear,*" Peter quotes with a soft smile. "*But the ability to act in spite of it.*")

Harry has never stood up for himself, but he will always stand up for Peter Parker. It is Norman's own fault that he does not know this, that he has never paid attention. Yes, Harry loves his father - but he loves Peter, too, in all the ways you can ever love a person (he *always has*), even if he will not admit it, and it is not a choice. It was never a choice.

(Harry wonders if there is a world out there where his father is proud of him. He wonders how much of his soul Norman asked for in return.

Here, in this world, he is a disappointment. It is not, he thinks, the worst thing he could be.)

Plan A: warn Peter.

Harry's thumb is hovering over his speed dial when he thinks better of it. Maybe it's a paranoid line of thinking, but would it really be so difficult for Norman to hack his phone? To tap it, maybe? To bug this house? No, he can't call Peter or anybody else, not from his phone. A payphone then, maybe? Where the hell would he find a payphone?

Plan B: find someone who can help.

There's really only one person he can turn to. One person who can handle this - who can stop Norman and keep Peter's identity safe. One person it would not raise alarms for Harry to go see, if Norman really does have eyes on him, given his ties to Spiderman.

But how the *hell* is he going to get anywhere near Tony Stark?

They are in each other's orbits because of Peter, yes, but Harry has never actively sought him out. Tony is part of the other half of Peter's life, a life full of heroes and Gods and madmen bent on world domination, and Harry goes only where he is invited.

So he does the only thing he can, and come 8AM the following day, Harry finds himself in the lobby of Stark Tower in his most cutting suit, sneering down at the receptionist. His heart is racing in his chest, and he pulls out every spoiled-rich-kid-I-am-Harry-*Osborn*-dammit trick he knows, demanding to speak with HR, and once he gets to HR, demanding to speak with Pepper Stark, née Potts. He gets as far as loudly berating her personal receptionist before Happy arrives, which, honestly, was the goal all along.

"Harry? What the hell are you doing?" Happy frowns at him; clearly, he'd been prepared to boot the troublemaker out. The receptionist watches, wide-eyed, as Harry's entire demeanor shifts from haughty and rude to relieved and pleading. Happy, he knows a bit more - it's impossible not to cross paths with the man when he trails after May like a puppy.

"Happy! Thank God. I need to see Tony. There isn't time I - *someone's* in danger."

Happy, because he is the best person on the planet, doesn't need to ask who. He nods, turning about-face, and Harry quickly follows after him, Oxfords snapping on the pristine tile.

“I’m going to need you to start at the beginning.”

Harry is standing in Tony Stark’s personal workshop, a place his father would kill for access to. The man in question has his hands flat on the workbench, one flesh, one metal - but he’s not *doing* anything. The hint of distrust remains in his eyes, even after all of this time, and Harry wants to pull his own hair out, wants to scream, *I have loved him more deeply than anyone for as long as I can remember, can’t you see that?*

Tony looks at him and sees what most people see, and Harry cannot fault him for that: a trust fund baby, a rich kid with anything he could possibly want, a competitor’s son - and maybe he is all of those things, but that is not all that he is. He has never seen behind Tony’s mask, and Tony has never seen behind his, but it doesn’t matter because Peter has always possessed that ability (the ability to see the *good in people*), and Harry has always trusted his judgement.

“My dad is going after Peter, he’s going to hurt him. I don’t know what more there is to say, except that we need to find him *now* and my phone might be bugged and - and I’m - ” Harry takes a deep breath, propping his hands on his hips as he does his damndest to stave off the incoming panic attack. “And I’m really trying not to freak the fuck out!”

“I’m already tracking him down. He’s not in his suit, FRIDAY is trying to get a lock on his phone right now.” Tony says evenly, still staring at Harry calculatedly. “Now tell me what’s going on, Harry.”

“There’s - this project, it’s sort of a pet project.” Harry tries to relax, but he ends up pacing instead, nervous energy bubbling to the surface. “For a while now, my dad has been trying to - well, not recreate, but adapt the...Super Soldier Serum. With government backing.”

“You’re shitting me.” Tony blinks, mouth dropping open in indignation. “Did they not learn from the last time?”

“Apparently not.” Harry heaves a sigh. “My dad calls it the Oz Formula. It’s never been anywhere near human trials but I - I don’t know what happened. He injected himself with it, I think, and he figured out that Spiderman came from Oscorp and he has this, like, sentient black *goo thing* - oh my God is this happening?”

“It’s happening.” Tony confirms as Harry struggles not to hyperventilate. “Why don’t you sit down, huh? Happy can get you a paper bag if you need one.”

“I don’t need a paper bag!” Harry explodes, throwing his hands up in agitation. “We need to find Peter!”

“We are!” Tony snaps back, raising his hands up placatingly. Softer, he says, “We are, kid. Once we know he’s out of harm’s way, I can have a SHIELD team on your dad and his creepy pet in no time - ”

Tony cuts off as a holographic display pops up to his right, and he frowns at it. “FRI, run it again.”

“It has been run three times, sir. This is Peter Parker’s last known location.”

“He’s at Oscorp, isn’t he.” Harry doesn’t even need to read the display; the sick, sinking feeling in his stomach, it’s back in full force. Oh, God. Could Norman really get the jump on him? When he found out Spiderman was Peter - could he really enact his plan?

(Harry knows the answers to both of these questions, and they are not ones he is willing to voice.)

Tony’s jaw is twitching, and Harry is pretty sure his metal arm is leaving indents in the worktable. When he looks up at Harry, there is anger in his eyes, deep and righteous and powerful. “Take me to him.”

Harry does not need to be told twice.

“Did you think I didn’t know?”

Norman’s voice echoes around the lab, thundering and resentful, but still with a crazed edge to it. He looks worse than when Harry left him, less than 12 hours ago. His hair sticks up at odd angles and he’s donned a body armor prototype Harry has only seen faint traces of in the Oscorp database. Norman cackles and it is blood-curdling, haunting, a sound Harry will never forget for the rest of

his life.

It is accompanied by an image he will never forget. Peter, eyes wide - there's a mask strapped over Peter's face, and the tube connects him to the symbiote's containment unit. He's strapped down to an operating table with tight, silver cuffs. They can only be made of vibranium if they're actually holding him, which tells Harry that this must have been premeditated on Norman's part, formula or not (yet again, Harry's stomach *twists*). Tony is a rigid line of tension next to him, eyes glued to Peter.

"Did you think I didn't know, Harry? Did you think you could *lie to me*?" Norman hisses at him, fingers twitching over a control panel that Harry can only assume will release the symbiote. "You're a failure, you're *weak*. Spineless! Not a single shred of loyalty in you."

"Dad, *please* - "

"I had him the whole time. I knew the *whole time*, while you lied to my face!" Norman gloats viciously, sneering at him. "You thought you had me fooled, you idiot boy? Perhaps this will teach you a lesson."

"Hey, Assborn." Tony's metal arm is raised, repulsor active and trained on Norman. "Cut the shit. SHIELD is already on their way. You're outclassed and outnumbered. Step away before I make you crawl away."

"Ooh, is that a threat, Mr. Stark?" Norman grins savagely, tilting his head at Tony. "How very obvious of you."

Tony's eyes narrow, and he lifts his flesh hand to tap the nano-unit on his chest, the one he'd grabbed just before they'd left the workshop, the one he hasn't worn since the battle that took his arm. The Iron Man armor - it ripples around him, double-plating his prosthetic arm. Peter starts to struggle in earnest, but his restraints have no give.

"No, Tony, don't! Don't, please don't, you can't - "

"Last warning, dickwad. Let him go." The whine as Tony gears up to fire is high and pitchy, and Norman laughs again, that maniacal, deeply unsettling cackle.

“You’re going to hurt yourself, *please* - !”

“I think that’s enough out of you, Spiderman.” Norman says, and he presses the button before Harry can so much as blink.

“No!” Harry and Tony shout at the same time, and Tony immediately propels forward to grab Norman - who darts away from him, shooting aloft with some type of hoverboard tech. Harry watches in horror as the symbiote bolts down the tube and attacks; Peter’s eyes roll back in his head as he seizes on the table, limbs curling in obvious pain. He screams, but it’s muffled as the symbiote covers his mouth, absorbing the sound.

“Peter!” Harry crosses the room, ducking through the fight as Tony and Norman throw the room into chaos. Norman throws Tony into the wall, leaving an Iron Man-shaped dent in the paneling. Harry doesn’t know what to do when he gets to Peter, though. Peter is shaking and the black ooze is dripping, slowly obscuring his face as it screeches in delight.

He doesn’t really think pulling it off will do much good, but he would be remiss if he didn’t try, so Harry grabs at the sludge. It doesn’t work - the symbiote hisses, snapping at his fingers, and reattaches twofold to Peter’s body.

Except - for a split second there, he heard it.

HE IS MINE! WE ARE HUNGRY.

Tony and Norman shoot across above them - Tony pins Norman against the wall and he laughs again, unhinged - and Harry ducks over Peter’s body when one of them sets off an explosion, rattling the room. The symbiote snarls angrily; it’s covering a third of Peter’s body, now.

There’s only one thing he can do (it was *never a choice*).

Harry sinks his fingers into the symbiote, except he’s not pulling at it. It tightens around his hands, his arms, holding him in place. It’s suspicious, still in the process of forcing Peter to submit to it.

And Harry begins to talk to it.

Take me instead, he thinks, trying to relax despite the uncomfortable feeling as the ooze crawls slowly, up towards his shoulders. *I am lost, I am nothing, you can have me. Not him. Not him.*

YOU ARE LIKE US? The symbiote slides closer, a foreign presence in his mind, but Harry doesn't fight it; he lets it prod at him, filling up more and more space. It rifles through his head and he sees - his memories. Norman, burning his sketchbook, yelling at him *you are not good enough you never will be*; the other boys, at St. Norbert's, snickering behind his back; him, alone at the campus library, waiting for a best friend who was never going to show. **YOU ARE ALONE, YOU ARE AFRAID. YOU ARE LIKE US.**

Take me instead. His vision is blurred with tears, but he sees Peter gasping for air, as the symbiote recedes, transferring to Harry. *I am not important, not like him. You can have me.*

YOU ARE LIKE US. The symbiote chants, growing more excited. It writhes and Harry is terrified as it covers his body completely. His parents are arguing down the hallway; his mother is gone, never coming back; Peter is crying on the phone, and Harry cannot console him. **WE ARE VENOM, WE ARE HUNGRY. MINE, MINE.**

"Harry!"

Peter's voice is wrecked, hoarse from screaming, and Harry wants to tell him that it's okay, that he can let him go, but he can't. Peter is still trying in vain to get off the table, and Harry uses what little autonomy he has left to reach down and snap the restraints off - the symbiote oozes easily in the tight space and obeys his simple command.

WE ARE HUNGRY. Venom implores, and Harry forces them to step back, away from the table. Peter sits up, confused and desperate, watching them.

No. Harry says, trying to be firm, assertive. The symbiote ripples restlessly, and the gnawing, aching hunger becomes apparent. The flow of information is two-way, apparently. *Not him.*

WHY NOT? They are diving through Harry's brain again, memories bursting between them like fireworks; Harry and Peter at Coney Island laughing at some stupid joke, in line for the roller coaster; building a Star Destroyer with Ned, Peter being useless in the corner; holding Peter's hand while they visit his mother's grave, crying without shame.

We love him. Harry admits quietly, and the symbiote hums thoughtfully, contemplating the

reasoning. *He is our best friend. Not him.*

“Harry, *please*.” Peter begs, and he’s crying, now. He reaches out and this time, Harry doesn’t have the strength to force Venom away. “Please, you have to fight - ”

His fingers brush the symbiote where it’s covered Harry’s face and suddenly, it’s not the symbiote Harry feels - it’s Peter. Peter, who is desperate and scared and hurt, Peter, who thinks *please let him go, you have to let him go*.

Peter’s hand is on his cheek, and Harry closes his eyes, unable to keep a foothold, anymore. **WHY?** asks Venom, but it is not Harry’s memories they see this time: Harry, staring up at the clouds with him; Harry, patching him back up after a patrol; Harry, teaching him how to fight dragons and save princesses.

Peter loves him, too.

(He always has.)

Peter kisses him, and Harry feels a surge of something he does not have a name for; it is too bright and brilliant. Peter is warm and solid and his lips are slightly chapped, but he tastes like peppermint and spice.

(Harry has never felt so whole, a piece of his soul slotting into place. *Ah, there you are.*

It is not perfect, but life rarely is.)

YOU ARE NOT LIKE US. The symbiote hisses, terrible and cold, but if Harry didn’t know any better, he’d say it almost sounds disappointed. **YOU ARE NOT ALONE.**

Venom - he doesn’t know where the symbiote goes, only that it melts away; when he feels Peter, like this, *everywhere*, it’s hard to feel anything else (he doesn’t *want to* feel anything else). Harry’s knees buckle when the symbiote screeches shrilly and relinquishes control, and Peter catches him with a firm grip. He hears his father screaming and Tony’s repulsors whining as he finally shoots Norman down and it is not perfect, no, but it is *Peter*.

"I'm scared, Pete." Harry whispers when they break apart for air. They are on the brink of something, a precipice they could fall into together, down, down, down. As scared as he is - perhaps he has the strength to fall, as long as Peter is holding his hand.

Peter, for his part, just smiles, his nose bumping Harry's, his thumb tracing a gentle line on Harry's cheek. "Me too, Har. Me too."



Harry has sex with Peter for the first time at 26.

It just happens - one minute they're kissing, making out on Harry's bed, and then Peter whispers, "Do you want to...?" and Harry says, "Yeah, of course." Of course he does, he doesn't even need to think about it. It's *Peter*.

So they do it. It's awkward and gangly. Peter's pants get caught at his ankles, and he flops on the bed trying to kick them off. He tries to help Harry with his sweater, and gets Harry's arms tangled, halfway through. It's nervous and messy, and Peter uses too much lube because for all of Harry's inexperience, Peter has even less. He keeps asking, "Is this okay? You'd tell me if it wasn't, right?" until Harry kisses him to shut him up. "Just *stick it in* already, would you?"

Peter is so, so gentle. He holds Harry close, face buried in his neck, and they rock together, slow and steady. Harry's hands spread on Peter's shoulders, fingers stark white against Peter's freckled back, and he brings his lips to Peter's ear to murmur, "You can go faster, you know."

Peter takes it as a challenge. His hips move faster and his teeth graze Harry's neck, and Harry

groans, deep, when Peter brushes something inside of him that sends flutters through his stomach, and says, “Faster, Pete, faster - “

“I’m givin’ it all she’s got, Captain!” Peter has the goofiest Scottish accent Harry’s ever heard. It ruins the mood completely, because now Harry’s laughing, laughing so hard his stomach hurts, and then Peter’s laughing at his own stupid, stupid joke, and he slips out and falls right over the edge of the bed.

Harry feels like a teenager all over again, and they don’t last very long when Harry finally manages to pull Peter back onto the bed to finish what they started. He has never felt more loved than when Peter falls asleep curled around him afterwards, chin tucked over Harry’s shoulder, lips pressed lightly against his cheek.

It’s awkward and messy and terrible. Harry wouldn’t have it any other way. It’s not the best sex in the world - but it’s Peter. It’s love. What else does he need?

Six months later, Harry sells the penthouse.

It isn’t as tough of a decision as he thought it would be. There are memories pressed into the walls, good and bad, but it does not ache as much as he would have guessed. Still, it’s a vestige of his father that Harry would rather put in the past, as neatly as he can while Norman is rattling around Ravencroft and reporters still buzz around like flies every week or so.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Harry?” Peter asks, concern in his voice. His hand rubs up and down Harry’s back, a reassurance. “You don’t have to, you know. It’s your home too.”

“I want to.” Harry tells him, and it’s true. He does not tell him *it was my home, but it isn’t anymore*, he does not tell him *a home is a place where you are safe and I have never been safe here*, and he does not tell him *home is where the heart is and my heart is with you*. He has a feeling Peter knows anyway.

So Harry sells the penthouse. He packs it up, room by room; he donates most of it, and keeps little. Peter, May, Ned, and MJ help him, and it is not as hard as anyone thought it would be (not when there is laughter and friends to help him through it).

He finds his mother's paintings in the attic, wrapped tightly in bubble wrap, and Harry smiles.

(Norman could rid himself of many things - his soul, his decency, his inhibitions - but he could not rid himself of his heart.)

Surrounded by boxes in their new apartment, Peter holds Harry's hand in his like that's what he was always meant to do.

They tell you that you cannot choose your family, and they are right.

What they do not tell you is that sometimes, if you're lucky, your family chooses you.

End Notes

I write Spiderman with no hyphen for the aesthetic.

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